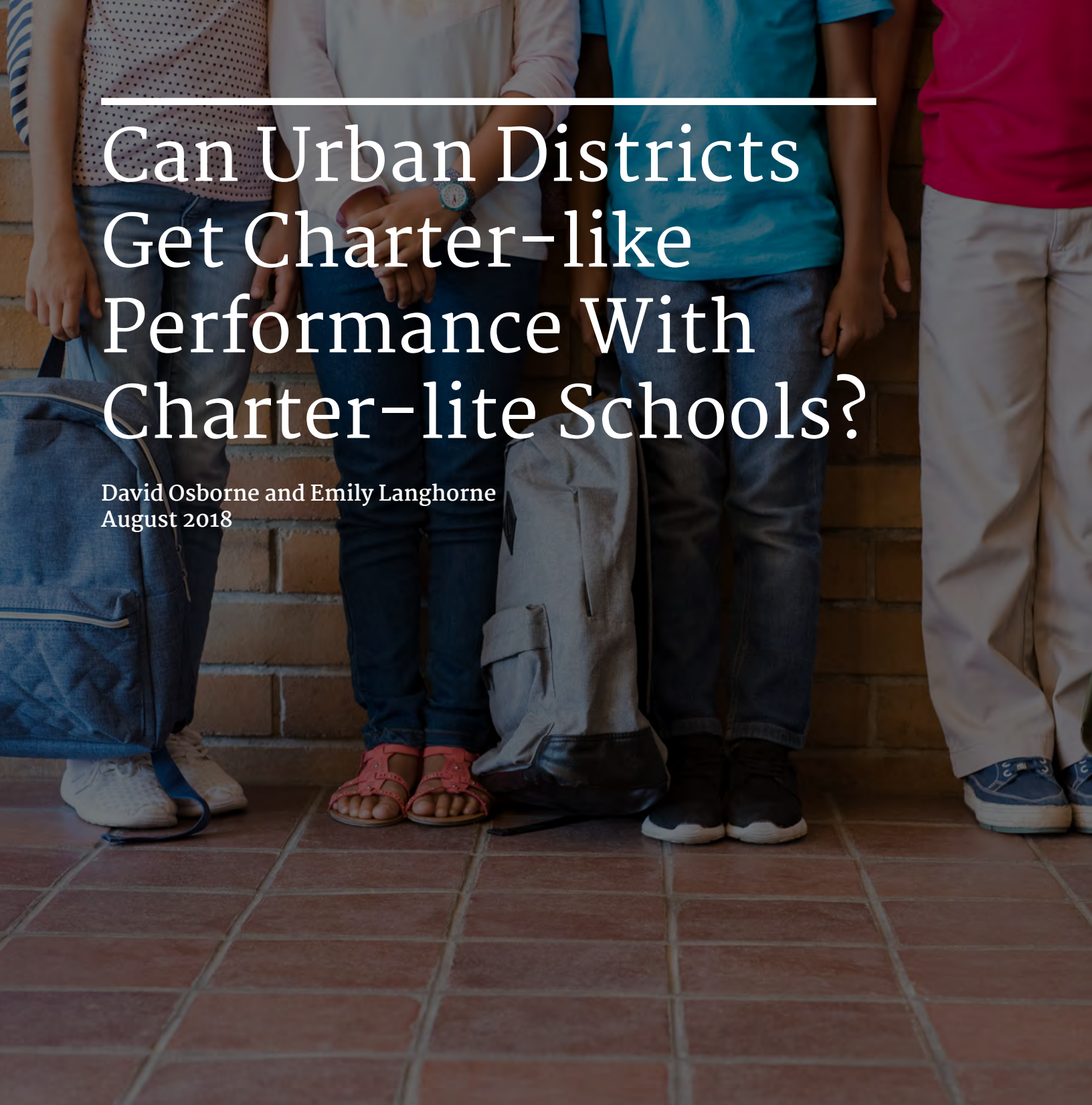


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# Can Urban Districts Get Charter-like Performance With Charter-lite Schools?

David Osborne and Emily Langhorne  
August 2018



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# Executive Summary

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AUGUST 2018

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David Osborne and  
Emily Langhorne

Over the past 15 years, cities across the country have experienced rapid growth in the number of public charter schools serving their students.

When implemented with fidelity, the charter formula – autonomy, choice, diversity of school designs, and real accountability – produces continuous improvements in school quality, with impressive student gains in charter schools serving high-minority, high-poverty populations.<sup>1</sup>

Facing competition from public charters, urban school districts from Boston to Denver to Los Angeles began to look for ways to increase student achievement in their schools. Some attempted to spur charter-like innovation by granting traditional public school leaders more autonomy. District-run “autonomous” schools are a hybrid model – a halfway point between charters and traditional public schools. They’re still operated and supported by district employees, but they can opt out of many district policies and, in some models, union contracts.

The theory behind school-level autonomy is that students can achieve more if those who understand their needs best – namely, principals and teachers, not the central office – make the decisions that affect their learning. While the amount of autonomy afforded district-run autonomous schools differs from district to district, quite a few have invested in this strategy. In this report – which is based on analysis of test scores from 2015 and 2016 and interviews with participants in Boston, Memphis, Denver, and Los Angeles – we will examine

different models, look at their results, and draw out lessons for other districts considering an autonomy strategy.

Districts grant their autonomous schools some formal autonomy over at least one of six categories. However, not all autonomies are created equal. Most school leaders agree that some kinds of autonomy prove more essential to success than others. Ranked in rough order of importance, the categories include autonomy over:

1. **Staffing:** Do school leaders have the power to select and remove their teachers and other staff and determine how to evaluate and pay them?
2. **Learning model:** Are the schools free to adopt different focuses (arts, STEM, etc.) and learning models, such as Montessori, blended learning, project based, and dual-language immersion?
3. **Curriculum:** Are school leaders free to determine their own curricula, textbooks, software, and the like?
4. **Budgeting:** Can school leaders spend their resources to best serve student needs, or are budget formulas determined by the central office?
5. **School calendar and schedule:** Are schools allowed to change the lengths and schedules of their school days and years?
6. **Professional development:** Do school leaders and staff decide what professional development they need or does the central office?

Two other categories are worthy of mention: special education and student discipline. Most of the district autonomous schools we studied were required to follow district policy in these areas, with one exception: Boston allowed its schools to “seek autonomy to implement a Code of Conduct that differs from the district’s Code.”<sup>2</sup>

Standardized test scores are only one measure of school success, but they are the most significant one. While success on tests varies between models and districts, one thing is clear: district-run autonomous schools in these cities may perform better than traditional public schools, but they seldom perform as well as independent public charters. When we use statistical methods to control for – i.e., remove – the effects of ethnicity, race, language proficiency, socio-economic level, and special education population, student achievement data reveals a positive relationship between school autonomy and student achievement. However, this pattern does not hold true for every model, and even district schools with the most autonomy seldom outperform their charter school counterparts. Memphis is an exception, no doubt because the district concentrated its best principals and teachers in its autonomous schools and gave them extra funding and support.

Our analysis suggests that autonomy is necessary but not sufficient to deliver higher student achievement. It also suggests that districts find it difficult to give their own schools as much autonomy as most charters enjoy – and almost impossible to give them the same degree of accountability for performance. Public charter schools outperform district-run autonomous schools for five primary reasons, in our view:

- Most independent charter schools have true autonomy.
- Most charter schools are schools of choice.
- Most independent charters are held accountable for student performance and closed or replaced if it lags too far behind grade levels.
- Most independent charters go through a careful authorization process.
- Independent charter sectors are more sustainable than in-district autonomous zones.
- Authorize district-run autonomous schools like charter schools.
- Ensure continuous improvement by using a clear system of accountability to close and/or replace failing schools.
- Invest in the development of autonomous school leaders.
- When possible, give families a choice of autonomous schools.
- Explore new district-run autonomous models from other cities.

In some cities, the political landscape makes chartering difficult. When it's not possible to invest in growing a charter sector, in-district autonomous models are the second best option. If districts are going to pursue an autonomous school strategy, the lessons discussed above and experiences in the four cities we have studied suggest these recommendations:

- Protect unrestricted autonomy.
- Create a district office or independent board to support and protect autonomous schools.
- Articulate a district-wide theory of action and secure buy-in from central office staff.
- Turn some central services into public enterprises that must sell their services to schools, in competition with other providers.

If they give school leaders true autonomy and hold their schools accountable for results, districts can use autonomous models to produce an increase in student achievement, perhaps approaching that of strong charter sectors. By following the recommendations above, districts can create self-renewing systems of schools, in which every school has the incentives and the autonomy to continuously innovate and improve. At the same time, they can offer a variety of school models to families, to meet a variety of children's needs.

Sustainability of in-district autonomy and accountability will always be a question. But, if done well and sustained, such schools have the potential to improve public education in urban America.

1 *Urban Charter School Study Report on 41 Regions* (Stanford, CA: Center for Research on Educational Outcomes, 2015), at <http://urbancharters.stanford.edu/index.php>.

2 Center for Collaborative Education, *Boston Autonomous Schools Manual: Policies and Responsibilities for Pilot, Innovation, & Horace Mann Charter Schools* (Boston: Boston Public Schools, June 2014), 61.



# Can Urban Districts Get Charter-like Performance With Charter-lite Schools?

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the past 15 years, cities across the country have experienced rapid growth in the number of public charter schools serving their students.

Charter schools are public schools operated by independent organizations, usually nonprofits. Freed from the many rules that constrain district-operated schools, charter school leaders are encouraged to design schools that meet the particular needs of their students. Since most are schools of choice, they can also create diverse learning models that meet the diverse needs of different students. When charter authorizers are faithful to the model (which is not the case in every state or city), they hold schools accountable for their performance, closing or replacing them if children aren't learning.

This formula – autonomy, choice, diversity of school designs, and accountability – produces continuous improvements in school quality, with impressive student gains in charter schools serving high-minority, high-poverty populations.<sup>1</sup>

Facing competition from public charters, urban school districts from Boston to Denver to Los Angeles began to look for ways to increase student achievement in their schools. Some attempted to spur charter-like innovation by

granting traditional public school leaders more autonomy. District-run “autonomous” schools are a hybrid model – a halfway point between charters and traditional public schools. They’re still operated and supported by district employees, but they can opt out of many district policies and, in some models, union contracts.

**This formula – autonomy, choice, diversity of school designs, and accountability – produces continuous improvements in school quality, with impressive student gains in charter schools serving high-minority, high-poverty populations.**

The theory behind school-level autonomy is that students can achieve more if those who understand students’ needs best – namely, principals and teachers, not the central office – make the decisions that affect their learning. While the amount of autonomy afforded district-run autonomous schools differs from district to district, quite a few have invested in this strategy.

In this report, which is based on analysis of test scores from 2015 and 2016 and interviews with participants in Boston, Memphis, Denver, and Los Angeles, we will examine different models, look at their results, and draw out lessons for other districts considering an autonomy strategy.

Standardized test scores are only one measure of school success, but they are the most significant one. While success on tests varies between models and districts, one thing is clear: District-run autonomous schools in these cities may perform better than traditional public schools, but they seldom perform as well as independent public charters. When we use statistical methods to control for (i.e.,

remove) the effects of ethnicity, race, language proficiency, socio-economic level, and special education population, student achievement data reveals a positive relationship between school autonomy and student achievement. However, this pattern does not hold true for every model, and even district schools with the most autonomy seldom outperform their charter school counterparts. Memphis is an exception, no doubt because the district concentrated its best principals and teachers in its autonomous schools and gave them extra funding and support.

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Our analysis suggests that autonomy is necessary but insufficient to deliver higher student achievement. It also suggests that districts find it difficult to give their own schools as much autonomy as most charters enjoy – and find it almost impossible to give schools the same degree of accountability for performance.

### **THE LANDSCAPE: A REVIEW OF DISTRICT-RUN AUTONOMOUS SCHOOLS IN FOUR CITIES**

Districts grant their autonomous schools some formal autonomy over at least one of six categories. However, not all autonomies are created equal. Most school leaders agree that some kinds of autonomy prove more essential to success than others. Ranked in rough order of importance, the categories include autonomy over:

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Two other categories are worthy of mention: special education and student discipline. Most of the district autonomous schools we studied were required to follow district policy in these areas, with one exception: Boston allowed its schools to “seek autonomy to implement a Code of Conduct that differs from the district’s Code.”<sup>2</sup>

Depending on the model, district-run autonomous schools have varying levels of autonomy, even within the same district. In what follows, we classify models as having

high, middle, or low levels of autonomy. School models considered to have high autonomy have been granted more freedoms in the areas considered to be of greater importance, such as staffing and learning models. Those with low autonomy have more autonomy than a traditional public school, but mainly in the less important categories. None of these models has the maximum autonomy of an independently operated public charter school.

### BOSTON BREAKS THE TRADITIONAL SCHOOL MOLD

Boston’s charter schools are remarkably successful, considered by many education experts to be the best in the country.<sup>3</sup> As a result, Boston Public Schools (BPS), which serves more than 56,000 students, has been attempting to innovate by increasing autonomy in its schools for more than a decade, with mixed results.<sup>4</sup> It has four models: pilot schools, innovation schools, turnaround schools, and Horace Mann (in-district) charter schools. Of the district’s 125 schools, 43 are autonomous schools, serving about a third of BPS students.<sup>5</sup>

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Dr. Tommy Chang, Boston’s superintendent from 2015 through June of 2018, believed strongly in school-level autonomy for all public schools. A former teacher and charter school founder, he also ran the Los Angeles Unified School District’s Intensive Support & Innovation Center, overseeing 135 autonomous schools. Dr. Donna Muncey, the deputy superintendent for strategy, says, “As long as autonomous schools are meeting state requirements and following state laws, they can use whatever curriculum and

learning model best meets the needs of their students. As much as possible, the goal here is to honor the autonomy that was granted to the schools and their leaders, as long as students are learning and laws are being followed. When autonomous schools struggle, that's when we have to step in. If performance levels decline, we might restrict autonomies in places where we identify weaknesses."

The autonomies granted to Boston's schools vary depending on the school model. Turnaround schools have mid-level autonomy, while pilot schools, innovation schools, and Horace Mann charter schools all have high autonomy. (For the details on each model, see the appendix.) Generally, those with high autonomy performed better than traditional district schools on standardized tests in 2015 and 2016 – with Horace Mann charters doing best – but none performed nearly as well as independent charters.

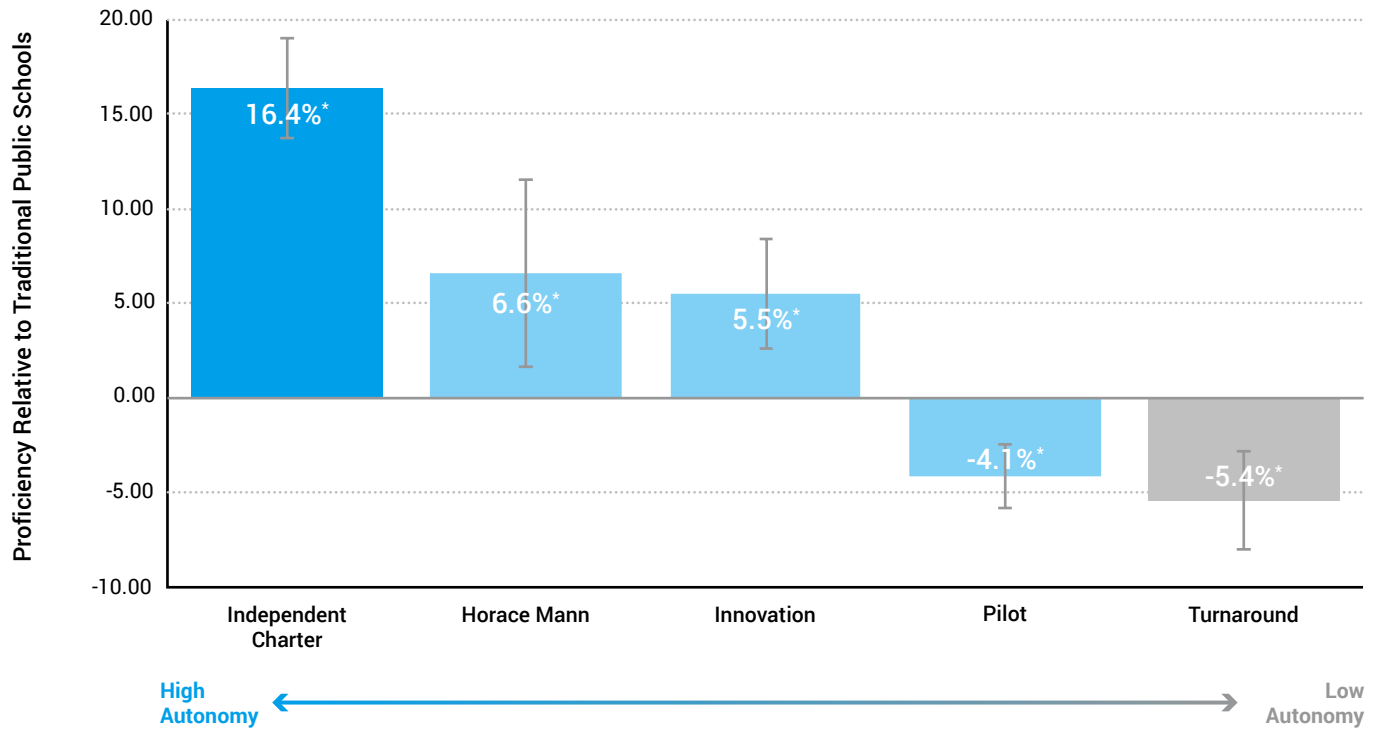
**Generally, those with high autonomy performed better than traditional district schools on standardized tests in 2015 and 2016 – with Horace Mann charters doing best – but none performed nearly as well as independent charters.**



We analyzed test score data from the 2015 and 2016 Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) exams in Massachusetts for all four types of autonomous schools, plus independent charters. When we controlled for ethnicity, race, language proficiency, socio-economic level, and special education population, students at innovation schools and Horace Mann charter schools were more likely to be proficient than students in traditional public schools, but those in pilot schools were less likely to be proficient. Students in turnaround schools were also less likely to be proficient, but that was not unexpected: As "at risk" schools, they had started far behind. (See Figure 1.)



**FIGURE 1: Association of School Type with Percent Proficient on PARCC 2015 and 2016\***



\*Statistically significant  
 Error bars: 95% Confidence Interval  
 Data Source: Massachusetts Department of Education

A similar pattern holds for academic growth. The Massachusetts Department of Education uses a measure called Student Growth Percentile (SGP). Each student with at least two consecutive years of PARCC scores receives an SGP, which measures how much the student’s scores changed relative to other students statewide who had similar scores in the prior year or years. The SPG measures student progress by comparing one student’s progress to his “academic peers” – those with similar performance histories on the PARCC

test. This analysis is limited to one year, because Massachusetts switched to the Common Core-aligned PARCC tests in 2015.

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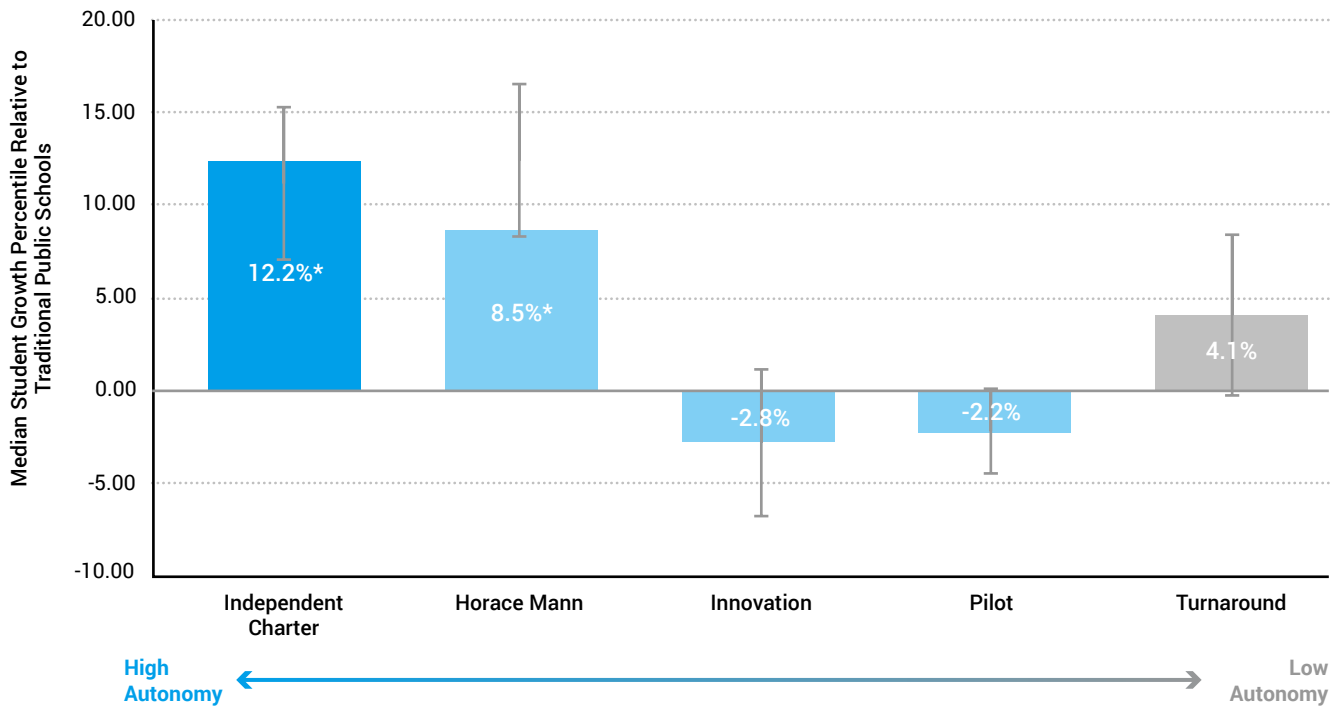
Students at Horace Mann charters showed more annual growth than students at traditional public schools, but not as much as those at

\* The error bars in these graphs show the 95 percent confidence interval, meaning that – if we computed a confidence interval 100 times – 95 out of 100 times this range would contain the true proficiency rates. Additionally, we measure statistical significance at a p-value of less than 0.05. A p-value is the chance of seeing results as extreme as those observed if the result were purely due to chance. With a p-value measuring less than 5 percent, the results are statistically significant – meaning the likelihood of the results being due to random explanation is less than 5 percent.

independent charters. As Figure 2 shows, innovation and pilot schools appeared to produce less growth than traditional district schools, but the difference was not statistically significant – meaning we cannot prove their results were any different from those of

traditional district schools. Turnaround schools appeared to produce greater student growth than traditional schools but, again, the results were not statistically significant, so we can't conclude they were outperforming traditional schools.

**FIGURE 2: Association of School Type with Median Student Growth Percentile (SGP) on PARCC from 2015 to 2016**



\*Statistically significant

Error bars: 95% Confidence Interval

Data Source: Massachusetts Department of Education

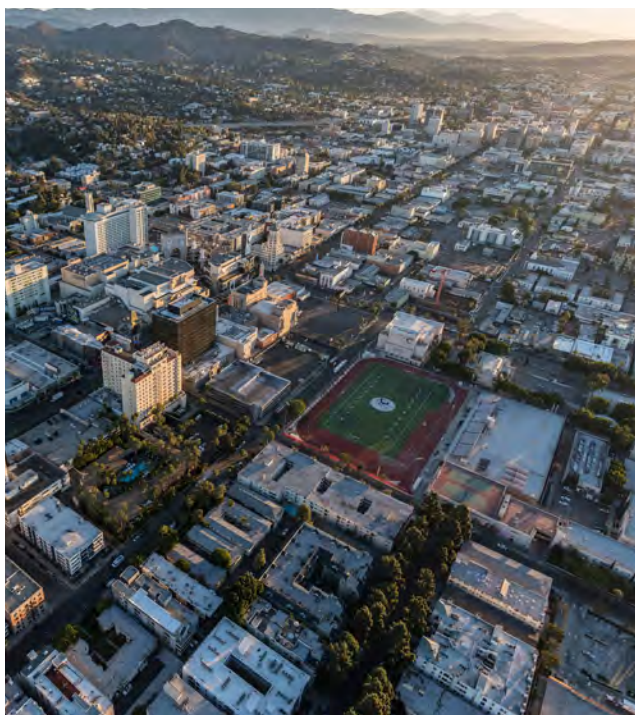
**LOS ANGELES: THE TEACHERS UNION LIMITS AUTONOMY**

Serving more than 11 times as many students as BPS, Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) is the second largest district in the country. Its 1,147 schools are spread over six regional districts, with a local superintendent overseeing each district. In addition to traditional public schools and independent charter schools, the district has five models of in-district autonomous schools: pilot schools, local initiative schools (LIS), expanded school-

based management model (ESBMM) schools, partnership schools, and affiliated charters.<sup>6</sup> Different models grew out of different eras of attempted reform.

Serving more than 11 times as many students as BPS, Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) is the second largest district in the country. Its 1,147 schools are spread over six regional districts, with a local superintendent overseeing each district.

After he was elected mayor in 2005, Antonio Villaraigosa sought the power to appoint the school board but was rebuffed by the state legislature. In response, he ran a slate of candidates for the board in 2007, winning four of seven seats. He convinced the new board to sign a memo of understanding with a nonprofit organization he had founded, the Mayor's Partnership for Los Angeles Schools, which empowered the organization to take over some of the city's lowest performing schools.



In 2007, the district's need to relieve overcrowding at Belmont High School triggered a separate initiative. The United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) and LAUSD ratified a memorandum of understanding that allowed for the creation of Boston-style pilot schools: intentionally small, innovative schools that received greater autonomy in exchange for greater oversight. In the following years, the district and union continued to compromise – expanding and finally eliminating a cap on the number of pilot schools.

From 2011 to 2014, Superintendent John Deasy pushed for continued decentralization, introducing LIS and ESBMM schools. But Deasy was often blocked by the union, limiting these schools to low autonomy.

Unlike Boston, none of the LAUSD schools have high autonomy – and none appear to perform anywhere near as well as independent charter schools. We classify Los Angeles's pilot schools and local initiative schools as mid-level and the rest as low-level. This limited autonomy is, in part, because the district put them back on a short leash after Deasy departed in 2014, and, in part, because all models operate under a strict collective bargaining agreement with the UTLA.<sup>7</sup> Working within the confines of the union contract makes it difficult for principals to have unrestricted autonomy over staffing, budgeting, and the school calendar.<sup>8</sup>

**Unlike Boston, none of the LAUSD schools have high autonomy – and none appear to perform anywhere near as well as independent charter schools.**

For example, thanks to the union contract, district-run autonomous schools have some control over their teacher selection process, but not over hiring. The LAUSD *hires* all teachers. When applying for a job, teachers must apply to, and be vetted by, the district. Once employed by the district, they receive healthcare and pay regardless of whether they've found a school placement. The district creates a list of this group of teachers – “the pool” – and sends it out to all schools, organized by teaching specialty.

The *selection* of teachers varies, depending on school type. All schools design their own process for selecting teachers from the pool to fill a vacancy, but they must choose off the

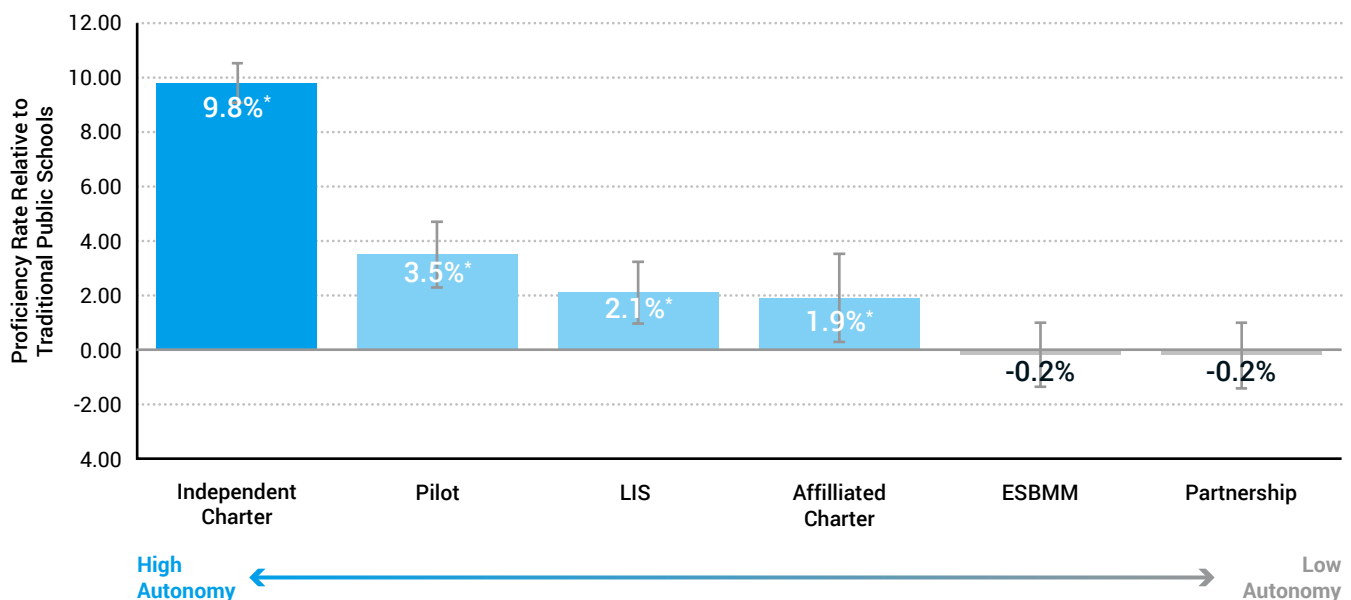
district’s list of hired teachers. In areas where the district has teacher shortages – such as special education – principals and selection committees can work closely with the district’s human resource office to recruit new talent. In areas where the district has a large pool of displaced teachers, however, they cannot recruit new teachers. Even if they are unhappy with the candidates, they must pick one from the list. (For more on the autonomies enjoyed by each model, see the appendix.)

Proficiency data from the 2015 and 2016 California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) exams, controlling for the usual factors, showed that schools with more autonomy tended to have greater proficiency. (Growth data was not available for LAUSD.) While students at independent charter schools had much higher proficiency than all other school models, students at the mid-level autonomous pilot schools outperformed their

traditional public school counterparts. However, students at the low-level autonomous LIS schools were also more likely to be proficient than students at traditional public schools, while students at low-level autonomous ESBMM and partnership schools performed at about the same level as students at traditional public schools, with no statistically significant difference. Affiliated charters outperformed traditional public school students, but they were located in more affluent areas, so other factors, such as teacher experience and parental involvement, could have contributed to their performance. (See Figure 3.)

Proficiency data from the 2015 and 2016 California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) exams, controlling for the usual factors, showed that schools with more autonomy tended to have greater proficiency.

**FIGURE 3: Association of School Type with Percent Proficient on CAASPP 2015 and 2016**



\*Statistically significant

Error bars: 95% Confidence Interval

Data Source: California Department of Education

## DESPERATE TIMES LEAD TO INNOVATIVE MODELS IN MEMPHIS

In 2010, Tennessee passed legislation to create an Achievement School District (ASD), a state-run turnaround district. The legislation permits the ASD to take over “priority schools” – those scoring in the bottom 5 percent on state exams. Every three years, the state compiles a list of schools designated for state intervention. The ASD then turns these schools over to charter operators or runs them directly, with the goal of moving the schools into the top 25 percent statewide.<sup>9</sup>

Memphis’s school district, Shelby County Schools (SCS), served 111,500 students in 207 schools last year.<sup>10</sup> When the state put together its first list of priority schools in 2012, 69 of the 85 were in Memphis. It “was like someone had pulled the fire alarm and we all needed to pitch in,” said Chris Barbic, the ASD’s first director. “It was this rallying call for everybody to come together, and let’s put political bonds aside and start recognizing there’s plenty of problems to go around. We need to work together.”

The ASD took over about 30 schools within SCS’s boundaries. Today, it operates four directly (a number that will drop to three in 2018-19) and contracts with charter management organizations to operate 25.

**The 2010 legislation also allowed districts to create innovation zones, [which] allow districts to give their lowest performing schools increased flexibility and additional support in exchange for greater accountability.**

The 2010 legislation also allowed districts to create innovation zones. Designed as a tool districts could use to avoid ASD takeovers,

innovation zones allow districts to give their lowest performing schools increased flexibility and additional support in exchange for greater accountability. (See the appendix for more detail on innovation zone autonomies.) Still operated by the district, these iZone schools are also expected to rise from testing in the bottom 5 percent on state exams to the top 25 percent.<sup>11</sup> There are currently 23 in Memphis.

**Still operated by the district, these iZone schools are also expected to rise from testing in the bottom 5 percent on state exams to the top 25 percent.**

Shortly after passing this legislation, the Tennessee state legislature in 2011 repealed collective bargaining for all public school teachers. Shelby County Schools and other districts still engage in “collaborative conferencing” with the teachers union, if 15 percent or more of district teachers request it, but the union’s power was severely weakened by this repeal.<sup>12</sup>

Collaborative conferencing is a form of negotiation in which topics such as salaries, grievance procedures, insurance benefits, fringe benefits, working conditions, vacation, and payroll deductions can be discussed. Other topics are prohibited, such as differentiated pay and incentive compensation plans, evaluation of professional employees, staffing decisions related to innovative programs enacted by the legislature, and all personnel decisions concerning assignment, transfer, and dismissal of professional employees.<sup>13</sup> Personnel decisions based on tenure or seniority are also prohibited.<sup>14</sup>

Collaborative conferencing may result in a memorandum of understanding (MOU) on terms

and conditions of employment between the district and the union, as it has in Memphis.<sup>15</sup> Such an MOU, which cannot exceed three years in duration, is binding after the local school board approves it.

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Operated separately from the SCS district, ASD schools are treated much like charters, though they are neighborhood schools rather than schools of choice. Because they were in the bottom 5 percent on performance and parents were not actively choosing them, ASD operators faced a tougher challenge than other charter schools. They suffered from high mobility and weak attendance: Many students didn't enroll until school had been underway for several weeks, and more than a third moved in or out during the school year. (This compares to an average of 10 percent mobility in all charters in Tennessee.)<sup>16</sup>

A majority of ASD charters took over entire schools rather than building a grade at a time, as most charter networks prefer.<sup>17</sup> Few teachers chose to stay, since they would lose their seniority in SCS and have to work longer hours, so the charters started with a high percentage of novice teachers.<sup>18</sup>

**A majority of ASD charters took over entire schools rather than building a grade at a time, as most charter networks prefer.**

ASD schools receive the same per-pupil funding as local district schools, but, unlike their

district counterparts, they are responsible for maintenance and utilities.<sup>19</sup> They had 50 percent more students with disabilities than SCS schools but no extra money for those with severe needs.<sup>20</sup> Unlike traditional district schools and charters authorized by SCS, they could not turn for help to the district, which took advantage of economies of scale by bringing severely disabled students together in "cluster programs."<sup>21</sup> One charter reported spending more than \$1 million on special education but receiving only \$66,000 a year. Such costs diverted money from the schools' core academic operations and often eliminated summer and Saturday programs.<sup>22</sup>



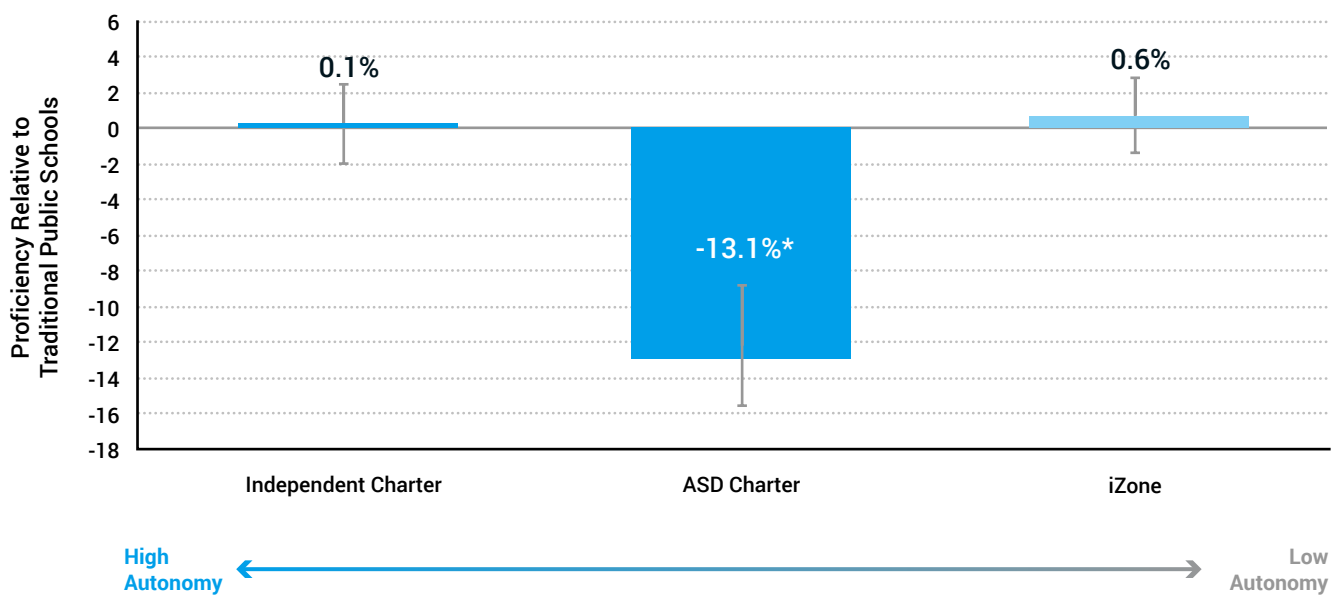
Unlike other models discussed in this report, the iZone recruited the district's best principals and teachers, which drained talent from other district schools. As John Buntin reported in *Governing*, "While iZone students began to show big gains in test scores, the schools that iZone principals and teachers had left behind showed declines."<sup>23</sup> On top of this, iZone schools received more funding than traditional public schools, ASD schools, or independent charters. Teachers in the iZone were compensated for the extra hour each day and were eligible for performance pay. The zone's coaching and support staff, which had been crucial elements of its success, were also expensive.

Unfortunately, we have only one year of data for Memphis, because Tennessee abandoned its 2016 testing due to technological problems. The 2015 test scores presented in Figure 4, controlling for the usual factors, showed that students at independent charters and iZone schools were no more likely to be proficient than students at traditional public schools, while students at ASD charters were less likely to be proficient. Given that both iZone schools and ASD schools began as schools testing in the bottom 5 percent on the state exams, it's

reasonable to expect them to underperform traditional public schools – particularly in their early years.

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**FIGURE 4: Association of School Type with Percent Proficient on TCAP 2015**

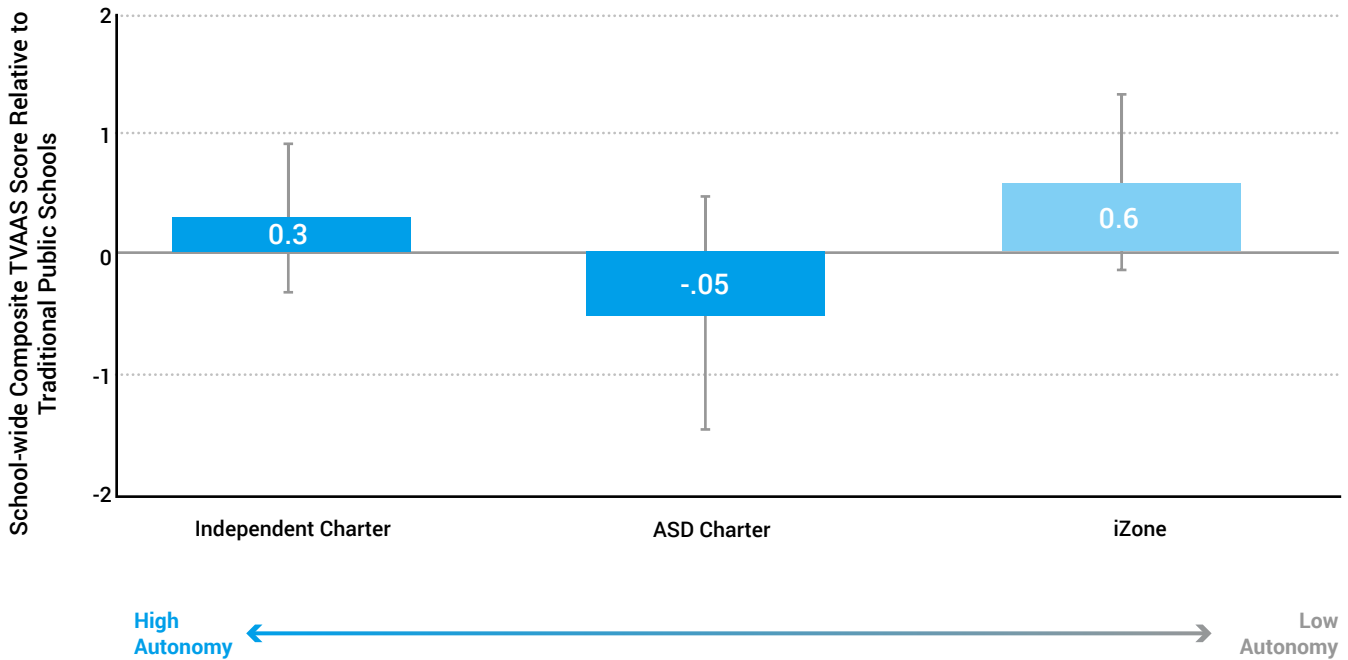


\*Statistically significant  
 Error bars: 95% Confidence Interval  
 Data Source: Tennessee Department of Education

Academic growth scores were no more revealing. Shelby County uses the Tennessee Value-added Assessment System (TVAAS) to measure average student growth at each school. TVAAS scores have a range of 1 to 5, with Level 1 representing the least effective and Level 5 representing the most effective. A Level 3 score represents average effectiveness, which means the students made roughly one year of growth.

Unfortunately, a five-point scoring system creates much less variation in data and much larger standard errors. As a result, none of the comparisons of student growth are statistically significant, as Figure 5 shows. Hence, it is difficult to reach conclusions about the impact of school models and autonomy on academic growth in Shelby County Schools, using only 2015 data.

**FIGURE 5: Association of School Type with School-wide Composite Tennessee Value-added Assessment System (TVAAS) Score on TCAP 2015**



*\*Statistically significant  
 Error bars: 95% Confidence Interval  
 Data Source: Tennessee Department of Education*

**DENVER DEVELOPS A DECENTRALIZED STRATEGY**

Denver is a city that’s no stranger to the success of charter schools. Denver School of Science and Technology (DSST), a homegrown charter network, has made headlines both locally and nationally ever since 2008, when 100 percent of its socio-economically and racially diverse graduates gained admission to college. In that same year, the Denver school board introduced a School Performance Framework (SPF), which evaluates school performance on test scores, academic growth, enrollment rate, student engagement, and parental satisfaction. When the annual ratings come out, public charters – which serve about 20 percent of the district’s 93,000 students – have usually dominated the top-10 list.<sup>24</sup>

Even before 2008, former Denver Public Schools (DPS) Superintendent Michael Bennet decided he needed to give schools significant autonomy so they could compete with charters. As early as 2006, he solicited proposals for “beacon schools,” through which individual schools could apply for waivers to union contracts and district policies.

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Between union opposition and central office intransigence, beacon schools never gained much autonomy. In 2008, when two beacon schools decided to use the waiver clause to request waivers to everything in the 120-page collective bargaining agreement except for the provisions that permitted union membership and representation, Bennet and his staff realized it was time for a change. They worked with State Senate President Peter Goff, who represented a district in Denver, to draft an Innovation Schools Act and push it through the legislature. Although the teachers unions protested, the new legislation allowed schools to write innovation plans in which they requested waivers to district policies and state statutes governing budgets, hiring, scheduling, school calendars, and tenure for new teachers, if the majority of teachers voted for the innovation plan. Schools could also implement unique learning models – such as STEM-focused, Waldorf, Montessori, and project-based learning – as long as they outlined the model in their innovation plan. A school could waive all or part of the union contract if 60 percent of teachers voted in favor of doing so.<sup>25</sup>

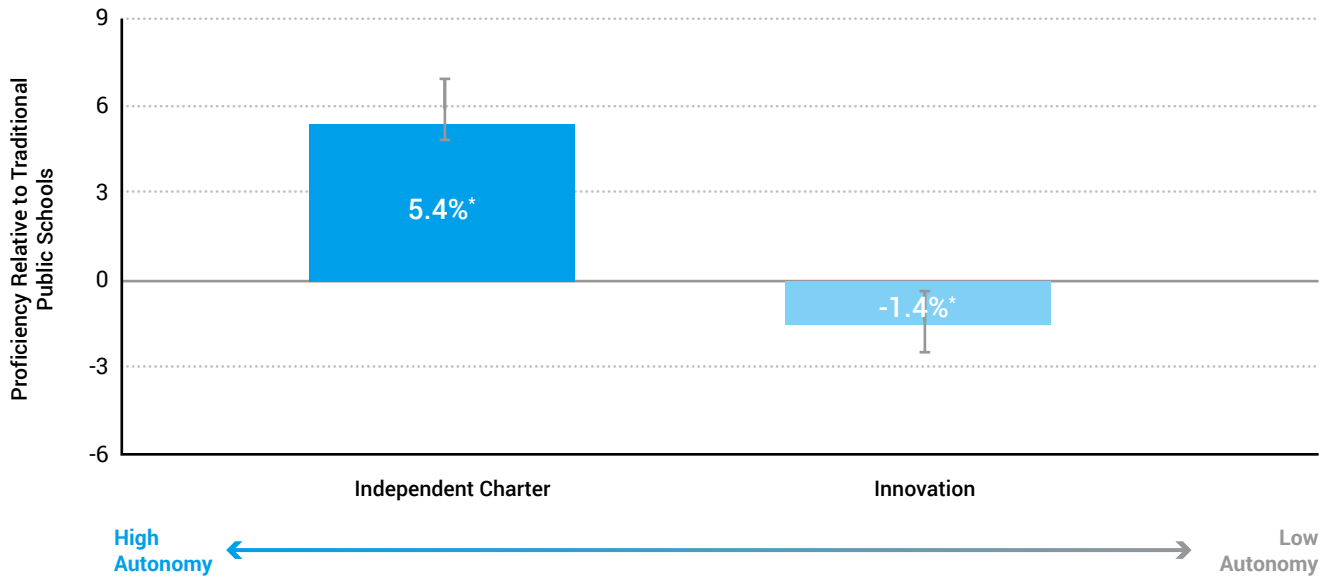
In theory, the legislation meant district schools could begin to look and act more like their successful charter counterparts. Unfortunately, when innovation school leaders attempted to use the autonomies in their plans, they often wound up in bureaucratic battles with the central office. Getting the central office to honor their waivers has been a long struggle. (For more on innovation school autonomies, see the appendix.)

**Unfortunately, when innovation school leaders attempted to use the autonomies in their plans, they often wound up in bureaucratic battles with the central office.**

Based on the results of the 2015 and 2016 PARCC exams – again controlled for the usual factors – students at charter schools in Denver demonstrated greater proficiency than their peers at traditional public schools. At innovation schools, however, students performed at a level of proficiency slightly below that of their counterparts at traditional public schools, as Figure 6 demonstrates.



**FIGURE 6: Association of School Type with Percent Proficient on PARCC Math and ELA Exams 2015 and 2016**

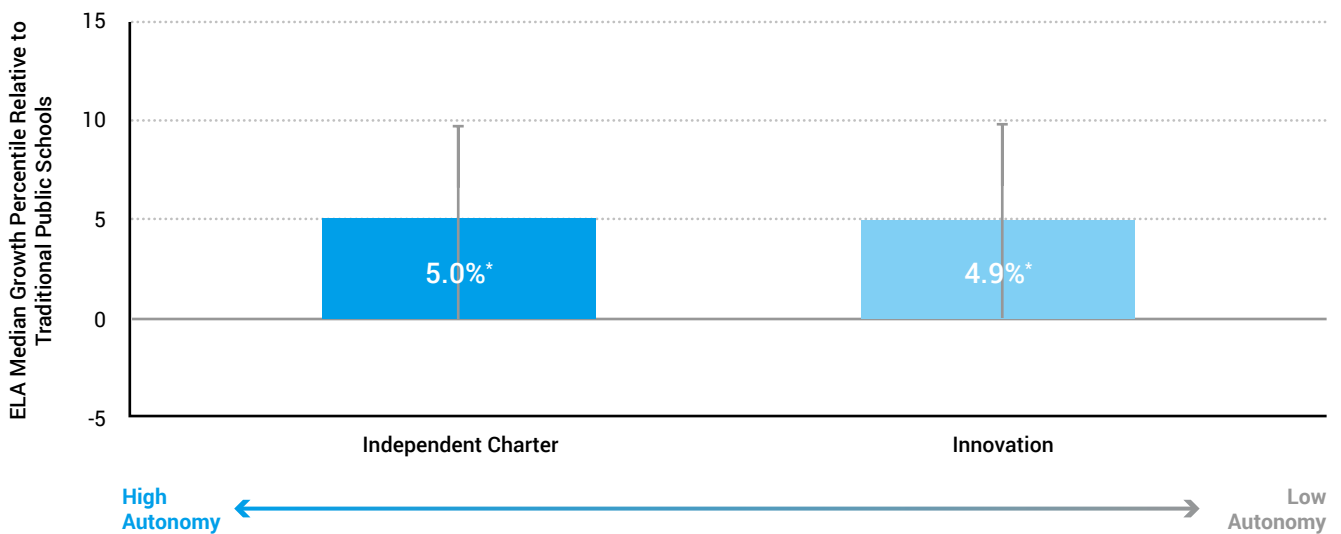


\*Statistically significant  
 Error bars: 95% Confidence Interval  
 Data Source: Colorado Department of Education

However, between 2015 and 2016, students at innovation schools experienced greater growth in English Language Arts than students in traditional district schools – and nearly the

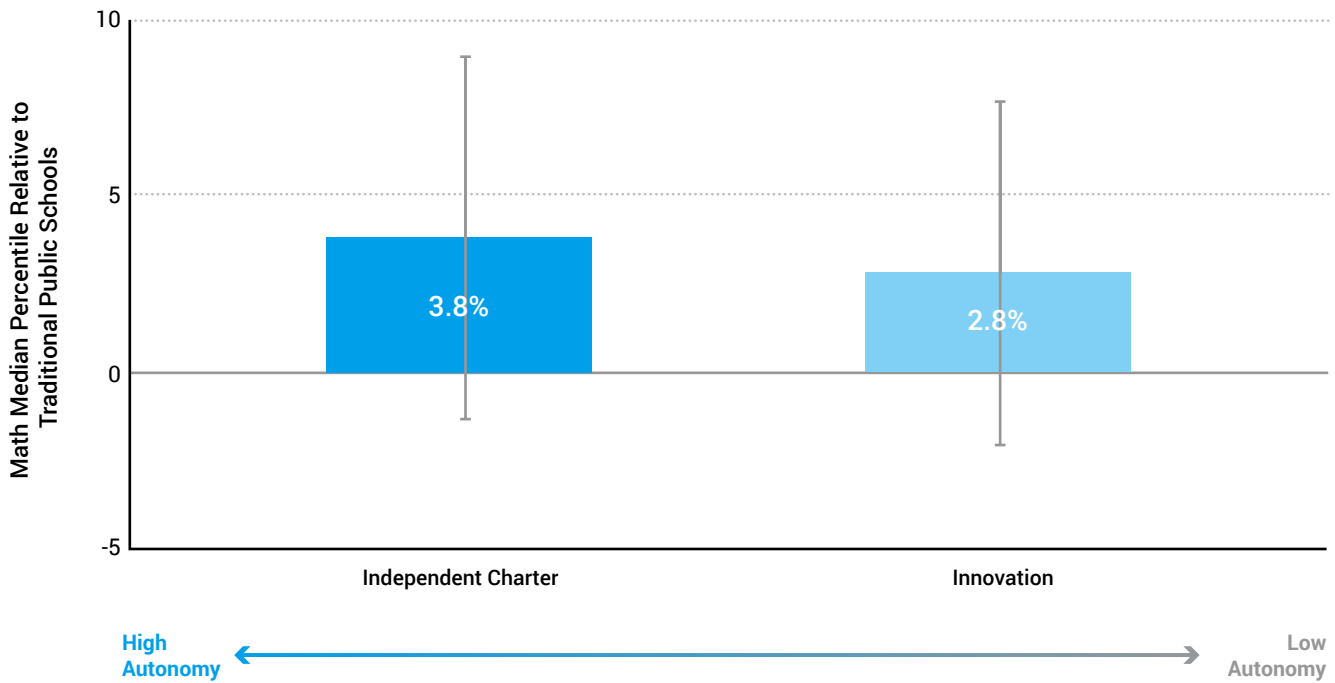
same growth as students at charter schools. Median growth percentile scores from the 2016 PARCC math exams were not statistically significant, as Figure 8 shows.

**FIGURE 7: Association of School Type with ELA Median Growth Percentile on PARCC 2016**



\*Statistically significant  
 Error bars: 95% Confidence Interval  
 Data Source: Colorado Department of Education

**FIGURE 8: Association of School Type with Math Median Growth Percentile on PARCC 2016**



*\*Statistically significant  
 Error bars: 95% Confidence Interval  
 Data Source: Colorado Department of Education*

**WHY INDEPENDENT CHARTERS PERFORM BETTER THAN IN-DISTRICT AUTONOMOUS SCHOOLS**

In the years for which we have data, public charter schools outperformed all other school models on standardized tests in three of our four cities. Memphis’s strategies of putting its best principals and teachers in iZone schools and providing extra funding and support may have produced the one exception. So the big question is: What do independent public charter schools have that district-run autonomous schools are missing?

**In the years for which we have data, public charter schools outperformed all other school models on standardized tests in three of our four cities.**

**1. Most Independent Charter Schools Have True Autonomy**

Freed from the constraints of district policies and union contracts, charter leaders can create educational models that work best for their students – whether Montessori or project-based or personalized or dual-language or internship-heavy or tutoring-intensive or any of a dozen other models that exist today. They can hire teachers and staff who fit with that learning model. They can choose curriculum and materials that engage their teachers and students. They can manage their own budgets, using money creatively and effectively. They can extend the calendar and change the daily schedule. They can design professional development and career paths that motivate and develop their teachers. And they can shape the cultures of their schools.

Many in-district autonomous schools allegedly have these freedoms too. In reality, however, the long reach of the district's central office sometimes hamstrings them, making their autonomies little more than paper promises.

Consider hiring autonomy: the freedom to choose teachers who will help students succeed. Union contracts often require that districts continue to employ unplaced teachers. When principals don't hire them, they sit in the district's reserve pool, collecting their salaries and benefits. That gets expensive, especially when ineffective teachers remain in the pool year after year. To save money, districts often force principals to hire teachers from this pool, which makes a sham of hiring autonomy.



In Los Angeles, even pilot schools – which have the most official autonomy over staffing – suffer from this. Multiple pilot school principals expressed frustration over the district violating their autonomy through the forced placement of teachers, known as “must-place” teachers. Since pilot schools are intentionally designed to

be small, they told us, one forced placement can impact the performance of an entire grade – and subvert a school's culture and morale.

**Multiple pilot school principals expressed frustration over the district violating their autonomy through the forced placement of teachers, known as “must-place” teachers.**

“The pilot autonomies do nothing in terms of staffing,” one pilot school principal said. “When the district is running with a lot of rified [reduction-in-force], bad teachers, if you have an open position, they will place them. You do not get a choice.” He explained that, when this happens, the school cannot hold those teachers to the employment requirements in the elect-to-work agreement (EWA). As a result, the school also can't dismiss the teacher at the end of the year for failing to fulfill the obligations laid out in the EWA.

“Must-place will ultimately destroy pilot schools,” another principal said.

Dismissing ineffective teachers is also difficult in LAUSD. One pilot school principal described the catch-22 he experienced when he gave a poor evaluation to a “must-place” teacher. “The district makes it very difficult to move a teacher once you give them an unsatisfactory performance,” he said. “You have to hold onto that lemon. It takes four to five years to move that teacher. They have damaged a whole cohort of kids by that time.”

Network partner schools suffer the same problems. In addition, they are supposed to have the freedom to design their own professional development, but the central office still expects all LAUSD employees to attend district-

wide trainings, meetings, and professional development. So the staff at partner schools ends up pulling “double duty” – wasting valuable time that could be spent helping students.

While iZone principals in Memphis did not feel the district encroached upon the autonomies it promised them, some complained about not having enough autonomy. Principals don’t control most of their budgets, for instance, and they can choose their own curricula and assessments only if their test scores are above a certain level. One school leader referred to his curricular autonomy as “boxed-in autonomy.” While he had a choice in selecting instructional materials, this choice extended only to books and instructional programs pre-approved by the district.

**While iZone principals in Memphis did not feel the district encroached upon the autonomies it promised them, some complained about not having enough autonomy.**

Another former principal of an iZone school said he only had half the important autonomies an independent charter school principal would enjoy. He didn’t have the budgetary freedom to put aides in every classroom, for example. He wanted a full-time psychologist, but the district gave him one only one day a week. He needed an operations manager but couldn’t move money to fund that position. He had no power to replace his custodial staff. And, when he took over his school, it needed repainting, but he could not move funds to have it done – so he and the teachers did it. If he had all the autonomy he needed, he said, “I could do some amazing things.”<sup>26</sup>

The principal of an innovation school in Denver ran into similar problems when he tried to

use the budgeting autonomies outlined in his innovation plan. According to his plan, he had the authority to make purchasing decisions. Using a pricelist provided by the district and one from outside providers, he could decide what transportation service, food service, facility management, maintenance, and student services to buy for his school.

Unfortunately, the central office never provided pricelists and continued to force its services on the school. When the principal contracted with Mental Health America of Colorado to provide services, the district ordered the company to stop. He also wanted control of the money allotted for his school’s security services so he could hire the Denver Police Department, because the district’s security guard wasn’t doing his job. Another dead end. Officially, he had full autonomy, but reality was very different.<sup>27</sup> Tired of constantly fighting with the central office, he left the district.

In Boston, former Superintendent Tommy Chang explained that different principals reported different experiences in leveraging their autonomies. “Some pilot school principals may say some of their autonomies are being infringed upon; other principals will say they are getting a lot more support from the central office,” he said. This has been true in Denver as well: Some central office staff respected school autonomy while others never quite got the message.

The struggle for independence at in-district autonomous schools can be endless, and – even for dedicated school leaders – exhausting.

## **2. Most Charter Schools Are Schools of Choice**

Districts with strong charter sectors benefit from a diversity of school designs. Because independent charter schools are schools of choice, charter leaders can develop schools

with specific educational models and cultures. Children learn differently, come from different backgrounds, speak different languages, have different interests, and thrive in different environments. Having multiple learning models allows parents to choose the schools that best fit the needs of their children.

**Having multiple learning models allows parents to choose the schools that best fit the needs of their children.**

When a district assigns children based on their neighborhoods, as some do, it's much harder to create diverse models. Imagine telling a parent their child must attend a Montessori school, a STEM school, or a performing arts school, and you will understand the difficulty.

In contrast, schools of choice can specialize. They can be bilingual schools, schools that use project-based learning, residential schools, schools for students in foster care, or a variety of other models. As a D.C. charter school principal reminded us, "Equity is not everybody having a shoe, but having a shoe that fits."<sup>28</sup>

Giving families the choice to attend a variety of schools also creates a second layer of accountability for independent charters, because the public dollars follow that choice. School operators are in direct competition for funds: The more students they attract, the more funds they have. Hence, parents have much more leverage in demanding what their children need, because they can send their children elsewhere and the money will follow them. All schools must keep improving and innovating; otherwise, they run the risk of losing students to their neighbors – and, ultimately, of having to close if enrollment drops too far.

**Giving families the choice to attend a variety of schools also creates a second layer of accountability for independent charters, because the public dollars follow that choice.**

### **3. Most Independent Charter Schools Are Held Accountable for Student Performance**

Unless forced to by the state, elected school boards rarely close or replace failing schools, because it's political suicide. Teachers unions often initiate district-wide protests over school closings, and parents and community members often join in. Because turnout in school board elections is often under 15 percent, their votes may determine the winners. For a school board member, closing or replacing a failing school often means losing the next election – even if it benefits children.

Most charter schools are not unionized, however. And they answer to authorizers, which often have appointed boards. If they are doing their jobs, authorizers hold schools accountable for student achievement benchmarks laid out in their charters, which are essentially performance contracts. Every few years, authorizers review their schools. If the students aren't learning, the school will undergo a period of probation – after which time, if student performance does not improve, authorizers will close or replace the failing school.

Even in cities such as Denver and Memphis, where the elected school board acts as the authorizer, closing failing charter schools seldom causes the same political problems as closing district-operated schools, because the district does not employ their staffs. Closing a charter school might result in a small protest from one school but never a system-wide

protest. Other charter operators are often eager to help more students by replacing the failing school, so they don't protest. Hence, elected officials are freer to do what is best for students, without fear of political repercussions.

**Even in cities such as Denver and Memphis, where the elected school board acts as the authorizer, closing failing charter schools seldom causes the same political problems as closing district-operated schools, because the district does not employ their staffs.**

When authorizers fail to hold schools accountable, charter schools generally don't perform much better than traditional public schools. Stanford's Center for Research on Educational Outcomes (CREDO) studies show that, in states where authorizers consistently close low-performing charters, charter students far outpace their district counterparts on standardized tests. Where they don't close schools, charters often underperform their district counterparts.<sup>29</sup>



By weeding out the worst performing schools, authorizers not only bring up the average, they motivate everyone working in the surviving schools. The threat of closure creates a sense of urgency among their staffs. Everyone in a school building knows their jobs are at risk if the school does not improve. In a typical public school, everyone may know there are a few problems – an English teacher who stresses creativity and fun but doesn't teach writing and grammar, or a math teacher who refuses to stay after school for tutoring because it's outside his contract hours. These problems are difficult to fix, particularly when teachers have tenure. When the adults in the building know they won't suffer the negative consequences, they often ignore the problems. The dynamics are entirely different in a charter, where none of the adults have tenure, and they all know they could be replaced and the entire school could be closed. In this situation, people usually find a way to come together and solve problems.

#### **4. Most Independent Charters Go Through a Careful Authorization Process**

Effective authorizers investigate charter operators prior to allowing them to open schools. Not all parents have the ability to assess schools, so we trust authorizers to ensure that the schools available to their children are of high quality. This requires evaluation of performance and replacement of failing schools, but also scrutiny of applications to ensure schools have a strategy for success before they open.

Denver Public Schools created an Office of School Reform and Innovation to authorize both charter and innovation schools in 2009. But for years, there was a crucial difference: Charter leaders normally had at least a year to plan and recruit a team, whereas innovation schools

usually launched fairly quickly. When school leaders have a year of paid planning, they can carefully select their staff, be particular about creating a learning model and curriculum, and figure out how to craft a constructive school climate. It took district leaders several years to realize they needed to give innovation school leaders a planning year as well. Once they did, innovation schools began to perform better.

**When school leaders have a year of paid planning, they can carefully select their staff, be particular about creating a learning model and curriculum, and figure out how to craft a constructive school climate.**

Some charter sectors benefit from charter incubators: organizations that intentionally select and develop effective school leaders, advocating for them, putting them in touch with the community, and helping them launch high-quality schools. In Indianapolis, for example, The Mind Trust – founded in 2006 by Mayor Bart Peterson and the head of his charter office, David Harris – plays this role for both charters and innovation network schools. It has raised millions of dollars and offered start-up space, grants, and other help to nonprofit organizations attempting to open schools. It awards two-year fellowships to individuals who have promising plans for a new school but need the time to carefully select staff, design the school model, and find a building.<sup>30</sup>

Unfortunately, many districts creating semi-autonomous schools don't invest in a planning year, nor in this kind of support for school leaders. "The district is a bit clueless," one pilot school principal in Los Angeles said. "They think it's as easy as 'Here is a bulletin. Just follow the bulletin and you'll get success.'" When his

pilot school launched, the staff was given just six weeks to open the school. "None of us had any experience as a principal. We were all just teachers."

The selection and development of strong school leaders is critical. "I've struggled with not having the right leader at a couple of schools," a leader at the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools said. Charter boards often hire principals who – because they have taught at or helped run other schools – understand how to use autonomy to shape school culture and increase student achievement. Not all district principals have the same experience, and some struggle because they are not used to being able to make their own decisions. "They don't push back on the district," one Los Angeles principal said. "They just do what the district tells them. They're good soldiers, but those same old procedures haven't gotten us new results."

In Boston, a 2014 report from The Boston Foundation and Boston Public Schools also found varying capacity among school leaders to leverage autonomies. The report said there was no "pipeline of leaders" prepared to excel in autonomous school environments.<sup>31</sup>

**In Boston, a 2014 report from The Boston Foundation and Boston Public Schools also found varying capacity among school leaders to leverage autonomies.**

## **5. Independent Charter Sectors Are Sustainable**

The Achilles heel of most in-district autonomous approaches is sustainability. In a large district, the autonomy agenda often rests with one or two innovative leaders. When they depart (as they always do), the bureaucracy usually reasserts its control. People in bureaucracies



tend to resent any special privileges given to those in “autonomy zones” – in all sectors of government. Education is no different. In contrast, most charter schools are independent of districts, and they have boards that defend them from efforts to limit their autonomy.

### The Achilles heel of most in-district autonomous approaches is sustainability.

Autonomous schools in Los Angeles offer the perfect example. Former Superintendent John Deasy, deeply committed to school-level autonomy, created a district office called the Intensive Support and Innovation Center (ISIC). Tasked with increasing innovation and improving low-performing schools across the district, the ISIC was exclusively responsible for managing pilot, partner, and “focus schools” – schools targeted for intensive intervention. Like Memphis’s iZone, it effectively operated as a small district within the LAUSD, overseen by a dedicated team that helped schools leverage their autonomies and avoid the district’s bureaucratic mandates.

Unfortunately, Deasy’s successor eliminated the ISIC and reorganized the district into six regions, each with an Educational Service Center to serve schools within its geographic boundaries. Each of the six districts is run by an instructional area superintendent appointed by the LAUSD superintendent.<sup>32</sup> District-run autonomous schools now fall under the control of their geographically-assigned center and superintendent. These superintendents are in charge of many different types of schools, which limits their ability to focus on the issues affecting autonomous models. Moreover, unlike the ISIC’s leaders, their roles were not created to support autonomous schools, so they didn’t

necessarily have specialized experience working with autonomous schools when they were hired. As a result, some of the six districts have imposed their usual top-down, compliance-oriented approach to school management on the “autonomous” schools.

LAUSD has an “institutional problem – they’re afraid of innovation and change and cling to ‘this is the way we’ve always done it,’” one leader at the Partnership for LA Schools observed. The ISIC “rocked the boat,” but, since it’s been gone, she has had to deal with three different superintendents for three different schools, since each is in a different region. The district’s political games create roadblocks that interfere with successful school models, she says. “That’s the piece I was hoping would go away when I joined Partnership, but it’s multiplied since the ISIC has been gone.”

Another leader at the Partnership felt similarly. “We don’t have much political support right now,” he said. “We were a moment in time under a particular superintendent and different union leadership, but, now, there is no champion for us.”



## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING IN-DISTRICT MODELS

Our research tells us that, in most cases, charter sectors will outperform both traditional public schools and district-run autonomous schools. However, the political landscape often makes chartering difficult. When it's not possible to invest in growing a charter sector, in-district autonomous models are the second best option. If districts are going to pursue an autonomous school strategy, the lessons discussed above suggest a series of recommendations.

**Our research tells us that, in most cases, charter sectors will outperform both traditional public schools and district-run autonomous schools.**

### **Recommendation 1:**

#### **Protect Unrestricted Autonomy**

When autonomies are limited, principals' ability to meet the needs of their students is also limited. Above all other autonomies, districts need to give their schools unrestricted staffing and budgeting authority and the power to define a learning model and choose the curriculum.

#### **Staffing Autonomy**

Staffing autonomy allows school leaders to hire effective staff who believe in their school's vision. Forced placement of ineffective teachers not only harms student learning; it can also undermine a school's culture. Principals need to be able to evaluate and dismiss staff based not only on performance but also on cultural fit. As one LAUSD pilot school principal said, sometimes a principal needs to "lose a teacher and save a school."

**Staffing autonomy allows school leaders to hire effective staff who believe in their school's vision.**

In Memphis, for example, iZone principals can remove tenured teachers based on fit – ensuring every teacher on staff shares the school's mission. (Those teachers are then placed at other district schools.) Principals and teachers at iZone schools agree that teaching at their schools is not for everyone, and that every teacher needs to be invested in the mission to significantly increase student learning. "Autonomy of hiring and replacing people who are not a good fit is one of the things that made the iZone great," a middle school principal told us. "Without high-quality teachers, an iZone school cannot be successful."

**Principals and teachers at iZone schools agree that teaching at their schools is not for everyone, and that every teacher needs to be invested in the mission to significantly increase student learning.**

Singing a similar tune, an assistant principal of a Boston innovation school said, "We have autonomy over hiring, so we hire people who fit with the school. Because we're such a unique school, we hire people who want to teach *here* – not who just want to teach in general. When we find the right candidate, they're excellent and they tend to stay. We can dismiss teachers to the pool for being ineffective and for not being a good fit with our school culture. It's nice to know that autonomy is there, but we haven't really had to use it."

Former Superintendent Tommy Chang understood the connection between staffing autonomy and school success. He had to manage the excess pool in BPS to ensure that mutual consent hiring was a reality at every school. Although schools must interview at least

two applicants from the pool, the district does not force schools to hire teachers from the pool.

Chang's administration also negotiated a union-approved package that provides incentives for people interested in leaving the teaching profession. In addition to creating policies that protect staffing autonomies, districts should offer packages that help persistently struggling teachers train for and transition to jobs outside the classroom.

### ***Budget Autonomy***

Allowing schools to control their budgets also enables principals to meet the unique needs of their students. "I bought three counselors," said one LAUSD pilot school principal. "The California ratio is 809 students to one counselor. I have 500 kids and three counselors. I did not buy a dean. Our school doesn't believe in punishing problems – we believe in treating them." Leaders who control their own budgets can also fund field trips for educational models that encourage hands-on experiences, or purchase tablets to create one-to-one learning environments in schools that emphasize blended learning.



School districts need to protect autonomous schools from the normal practice of losing excess funds at year-end. Permitting rollover of money from one fiscal year to the next encourages frugality and gives schools the financial flexibility they need. After being granted the autonomy to carry over money at his pilot school, one LAUSD autonomous school leader explained, "We're not going to spend willy nilly, because it's our money. If it's the district's money, the attitude is, 'Spend every dime before the end of the year, because, if you don't, you're going to lose it.'"

Permitting rollover of money from one fiscal year to the next encourages frugality and gives schools the financial flexibility they need.

### **Recommendation 2: Create a District Office or Independent Board to Support and Protect Autonomous Schools**

Inconsistent interpretations of and encroachments on the autonomies of schools limit their impact. School leaders spend a significant amount of valuable time fighting to exercise the autonomies they have been promised. Sometimes they get so frustrated they leave.

#### ***Central Support vs Central Control***

One of the main differences between Memphis's success with its iZone schools and autonomous schools elsewhere was the tremendous amount of support Shelby County Schools provided to principals and teachers. Principals in LAUSD described a bureaucracy focused on compliance rather than support, and a 2014 BPS and Boston Foundation report on autonomous schools in the city echoed this finding, which suggests that compliance-oriented systems like LAUSD and BPS (in 2014) did not have the capacity to

support autonomy effectively.<sup>33</sup>

Conversely, Shelby County Schools provides significant coaching for principals and has representatives who advocate on their behalf. Hiring coaches is one of the biggest expenses of the iZone, according to Dr. Sharon Griffin, former iZone regional superintendent and newly appointed chief of the Achievement School District – but it is also one of the most effective strategies to help struggling schools.

### ***Benefits of Central Support***

Districts with autonomous schools should create a central office unit dedicated to supporting them. It would ensure that school leaders could use their autonomies with ease and provide them with a direct connection to a central office employee who advocated on their behalf when disputes arose. It could also help craft new rules to give principals budgetary and staffing autonomy, help create alternative procurement rules and processes for autonomous schools, and act as a liaison between schools and the purchasing office.

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“Schools that are doing innovative things need extra support to navigate the bureaucracy,” explained former Boston Superintendent Tommy Chang, who ran the ISIC for LAUSD when John Deasy was superintendent.

A second alternative is to create a board to oversee and protect the autonomous

schools, as Denver, Colorado, and Springfield, Massachusetts, have done. Much like a charter board, these are 501(c)3 nonprofit boards. They are appointed, not elected, so they are free to make decisions that benefit students and schools without fear of political backlash. The boards are responsible for overseeing the progress of the schools within the zone, providing financial oversight, selecting school leaders and evaluating their performance, and protecting them from district micromanagement.

Such boards should also make school autonomy more sustainable, since they have some political power, given their independence, to fight back if new district leaders try to re-impose the traditional rules on autonomous schools.

### **Recommendation 3: Articulate a District-wide Theory of Action and Secure Buy-in from Central Office Staff**

Every school district has a theory of action that governs how the district manages its schools. These theories range from top-down district control, where principals have little decision-making authority, to school empowerment, where school leaders exchange autonomy for greater accountability.<sup>34</sup>

If districts want their autonomous schools to succeed, they need to articulate a district-wide theory of action that includes autonomy as a priority. Then they need to share it repeatedly with all central office employees, spending time helping them understand the new approach. Autonomous schools necessitate that many parts of the central office do things differently. Employees need to believe in the connection between school autonomy and student success, rather than seeing autonomous schools as an inconvenience and/or challenge to centralized authority. Otherwise, these schools will inevitably

cause tension within the system – and will eventually be rejected when their champions leave the district.

**If districts want their autonomous schools to succeed, they need to articulate a district-wide theory of action that includes autonomy as a priority.**

“I believe school principals and leadership teams are the actual change agents,” Dr. Chang said. “I want to figure out a relationship between the central office and principals. If we can figure that out and we can all agree on a theory of action, then that’s when you can really hold schools accountable for a change.”

Changing the mindset of the central office isn’t easy; it requires a huge cultural shift. District leaders must clearly articulate a school model’s autonomies across the entire school system to ensure a uniform interpretation of those autonomies. To avoid miscommunication, this information needs to be shared publicly via a platform accessible to school leaders, central office employees, teachers, and the community. District leaders need to openly discuss the intentionality behind their decision to create autonomous school models, articulating to central office employees the reasons for granting school autonomy.

Then, to help staff buy in, district leaders must launch a multi-year effort to change their habits, hearts, and minds. That means exposing them to new experiences, new ideas, and new emotional commitments. There are dozens of tools they can use to do so.<sup>35</sup>

#### **Recommendation 4: Turn Some Central Services into Public Enterprises That Must Sell Their Services to Schools, in Competition with Other Providers**

The fastest way to change the mindset of central office staff who provide services to schools – such as professional development, food services, school maintenance, and security – is to take away their monopoly and make them compete for their business. Some services, such as transportation and telecommunications, may be more efficient if they remain a monopoly. And policy and compliance functions should never be handled this way. But, for others, “enterprise” or “entrepreneurial” management allows schools to purchase services wherever they find the best deal.

**The fastest way to change the mindset of central office staff who provide services to schools – such as professional development, food services, school maintenance, and security – is to take away their monopoly and make them compete for their business.**

Districts shift the money for those services to the schools and – after capitalizing their internal service shops as public enterprises – force them to earn their revenue by selling to their customers, the schools. Edmonton, Alberta, pioneered this approach in the 1980s; Minneapolis Public Schools did it in the 1990s; and other public jurisdictions, including the states of Minnesota and Iowa and the city of Milwaukee, have also used it. It is the single fastest way to make central services more effective while also reducing their costs, because internal service shops have to sink

or swim in a competitive market. They almost always swim, because they are so much closer to their customers than private competitors are. But, in the process, they increase their quality and reduce their costs.<sup>36</sup> If they don't, schools are free to buy services elsewhere.



Consider the experience of Rob Stein when he was principal of Denver's second innovation school, Manual High School. "We were really dissatisfied with food services because none of our kids would eat the food they provided," Stein said. "For the first year or two, we continually gave them feedback, but nothing changed." A competing food service company moved into town, so Stein's staff contacted them and held a taste test, asking students which food they preferred. "We presented our results to the food service and told them we were going to contract with Revolution Foods."

The DPS food service director eventually asked if he could put together a competitive bid. "He came back with improved menus and we decided to go with the DPS food services. That was a win because choice and competition drove the DPS food service to provide a better meal for our students. They had

a huge competitive advantage, because they controlled the kitchens and had infrastructure – transportation, bulk purchasing – all on their side. But, before we had a choice, they were not responsive to their customers. After we broke their monopoly, they improved the product and provided better meals to the students."

### **Recommendation 5: Authorize District-run Autonomous Schools Like Charter Schools**

The process of rigorous authorization has been essential to the success of strong charter sectors. Districts should use similar processes to authorize their own autonomous schools – allowing only the most promising applicants to open schools and replacing schools that are ineffective at educating students. A careful authorization process weeds out weak proposals at the beginning, so the schools overall are more likely to succeed.

**A careful authorization process weeds out weak proposals at the beginning, so the schools overall are more likely to succeed.**

Although requirements vary by state, applications to open independent charters include, at minimum: the mission of the proposed school, the financial plans for budgets and facilities, specific education goals (test scores, graduation rates, etc.), and other information relevant to the capacity of the charter school to succeed.<sup>37</sup> Districts should require similarly thorough applications for their autonomous schools. They should also bring in outside evaluators with authorizing experience to help vet the applications.

Like independent charters, district-run autonomous schools should negotiate school performance agreements as a part of the authorization process. The agreements should

contain components similar to those of a charter, such as the duration of the agreement, exemptions to traditional school obligations, performance goals, and reporting requirements.

During the contract period, effective charter authorizers monitor the progress and compliance of schools without infringing upon their autonomy. Districts should strive to do the same. They should keep an eye on issues like enrollment, academic achievement, finances, and compliance with regulations.<sup>38</sup> If a school has problems, districts should inform the school, in writing, about its failures and require the school to develop a formal plan that addresses the specific problem(s). Districts need to clearly articulate the improvements required without overstepping their role. Oversight is not the same as micromanagement, and effective authorizers explain the results schools need to achieve without dictating *how* to achieve them.

**Oversight is not the same as micromanagement, and effective authorizers explain the results schools need to achieve without dictating how to achieve them.**

### **Recommendation 6: Ensure Continuous Improvement by Using a Clear System of Accountability to Close and/or Replace Failing Schools**

A common shortcoming among districts with autonomous school models is the district's failure to impose the kind of consequences that create real urgency among teachers and principals – closing and replacing failing schools.

In LAUSD, for example, network partners felt the district wasn't serious about holding the partner schools, or any district school, accountable for student performance. When Dr. Tommy Chang ran the ISIC in Los Angeles, he wanted

the LAUSD to close two pilot schools where the students were not making academic gains. "It was deeply frustrating for me because it was the right thing to do," he said. "These schools weren't serving kids, but, for the school board, if you close a school for underperformance, it's a slippery slope." After two years without action, Chang's team proposed closing the schools because they were under-enrolled, and the board finally agreed.

After the ISIC was dissolved, the situation grew worse. A leader at the Partnership for LA Schools told us the regional districts were reluctant to shut down any school whose operations fell under their umbrella, including autonomous models. Overall, he said, LAUSD "is showing very little appetite for closing down neighborhood schools – no matter what the performance is. They're less reluctant to close down charter schools."

In Memphis, school autonomy is meant to improve student achievement, so iZone schools are required to make academic gains every year. "iZone teachers operate with an urgency, because they know they need to get results," said a principal of an iZone middle school.

"It's a lot of pressure," another added. "They send out emails with your data on it, and you don't want to be the one at the bottom."

When schools failed to increase student performance, Dr. Sharon Griffin replaced principals – five in her five years running the iZone. "I provide our principals with a lot of support," she said. "There is no excuse [for failure], because they chose the whole staff."

Most independent charter schools know exactly how their performance will be measured; their charter lays out the benchmarks for student

performance, as well as other measurements of success. This is often not the case with district-run autonomous schools. In LAUSD, for instance, we found pilot school principals who were unclear about the accountability system used to measure their results, which led to tension between school leaders, governing school councils, and the district.

**Most independent charter schools know exactly how their performance will be measured; their charter lays out the benchmarks for student performance, as well as other measurements of success.**

While performance frameworks may vary from district to district, they should all require schools to meet specific academic growth targets. If schools fail to meet them, the district should provide them with additional supports during a probationary period. Schools that fail to meet targets after receiving managerial and pedagogical supports should be replaced.

On the other hand, if a school is successful, the district should provide resources and incentives to encourage replication. This is rare, but Denver Public Schools began replicating successful innovation schools in 2016-17.

### **Recommendation 7: Invest in the Development of Autonomous School Leaders**

Giving schools autonomy does nothing to help student achievement if school leaders prefer to follow district procedures rather than look for ways to be innovative. Districts need to invest in developing school leaders so they can take advantage of their freedoms. As one LAUSD principal said, “We need to spend less time on directives and more time on leadership.”

When districts do not invest in developing leaders, the success of their schools hinges on the mixed ability of principals to lead with autonomy. As a result, student performance at district-run autonomous schools is often mixed.

Careful selection of (and intense support for) principals has been a large part of the Memphis iZone’s success. The district began by recruiting its best principals. However, Dr. Sharon Griffin understood the importance of developing these leaders, so she provided support and coaching. “We want to empower principals – give them choices,” she said. “This can also shoot you in the foot because with empowerment comes great responsibility. I have to make sure my principals are ready to choose what they need.”

The iZone places novice principals in partnerships with experienced principals, as in a mentorship program. The partners meet over the summer and throughout the year to collaborate on strategies for leveraging autonomy to achieve results. The district also convenes weekly principal meetings to discuss instructional needs, student achievement data, and other issues. These meetings give principals an opportunity to evaluate and compare their progress and to develop strategies collaboratively.

In 2015, for instance, a group of iZone principals decided they weren’t making the best use of the extended school day. They got together over the summer to develop a scripted curriculum for the extra hour. Their goal was to design a curriculum that made the extended time more meaningful for students, while not burdening teachers with the obligation of planning an additional class.

At some iZone schools, teachers also have the option to work on leadership training. “Teacher



leaders” meet with principals to discuss the needs of their departments, and principals delegate some decision making, so educators have a voice in running the school.

By partnering experienced principals with inexperienced principals and focusing on teacher empowerment, the iZone has created a successful pipeline for leadership development. Overall, Memphis provides a good model for districts that want to invest in autonomous school leaders.

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#### **Recommendation 8: When Possible, Give Families a Choice of Autonomous Schools**

As noted earlier, without choice there will be little room to create different learning models for different children. Giving families and students a choice also empowers them, and people who feel empowered are more likely to give their best efforts. Those who are able to choose their school also tend to show more commitment to it.

In traditional public schools, there’s often a pervasive “culture of coolness” and a “norm of disengagement” that has little to do with teacher and educational quality.<sup>39</sup> Quite simply, the students in many schools haven’t bought into the educational environment because there’s little for them to buy into. They’re obligated to attend their neighborhood school, which is usually the same as most other district schools,

regardless of whether they want to. They have no personal choice in the decision, and it shows in their attitude toward learning.<sup>40</sup>

Student buy-in is incredibly important to learning. When students make a choice about where to attend school, they have, on some level, decided that they want to be there. They are more likely to buy into its learning model and school culture.

Despite these benefits, some communities still value the idea of a neighborhood school – especially at the elementary level, where parents want their children to be able to walk to school. In these cases, schools can give preference to students living in the neighborhood but still allow them to choose other schools, as Denver Public Schools does.

#### **Recommendation 9: Explore New District-run Autonomous Models from Other Cities**

As in-district autonomous schools continue to spread, some districts are attempting to refine the model, to give their schools true autonomy and real consequences for performance. By exploring a variety of successful strategies, districts can find and adapt the model that best fits their political climate and meets the needs of their community.

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#### ***Luminary Learning Network***

Denver Public Schools recently created an innovation zone – the Luminary Learning Network, with its own nonprofit board – to ensure that schools get more autonomy. The board negotiated a three-year memorandum

of understanding with DPS. The district is still the authorizer, but the LLN board is a kind of intermediary: overseeing, supporting, and protecting the schools.

The four schools in the LLN won the right to opt out of some district mandates, including professional development and district-wide once-a-month meetings for principals. They were also able to opt out of additional DPS internal services, receiving the funds instead. In the first year each school received about \$425 more per student than they otherwise would have, which leaders used to buy what their students needed. One school hired a full-time school psychologist, while another hired a full-time substitute teacher.

In return, the schools have pledged to improve their performance. If the schools were in the top two (of five) bands of Denver's performance framework, they pledged to move up within their band. If they were not in the top two bands, they pledged to move up a full band. If a school fails to improve by the end of its three-year performance agreement, the LLN can recommend actions to DPS, such as replacing a school or its leader.<sup>41</sup>

The district has extended the same budgetary flexibilities to its three "networks" of innovation schools that have replicated. And the board of education is interested in expanding the LLN to eight or 10 schools – the optimal size for sharing the costs of the board and executive director. One of the schools has plans to replicate, and the district has solicited applications for schools that wish to join the network in the 2018-2019 school year. Meanwhile, the district has also solicited applications for schools that want to form a new zone.<sup>42</sup>

### ***Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership***

Another model with its own board has emerged in Springfield, Massachusetts, under very different circumstances. The Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership (SEZP) contains nine struggling middle schools and one high school that have been given significant autonomy. It came about as an alternative to a state takeover of several schools. Massachusetts school reformer Chris Gabrieli suggested creating a zone overseen by a seven-member board, with four state-appointed officials and three locally appointed members.

The Springfield school board had to give up authority over the schools, but the elected members preferred that option to a state takeover. While the zone launched with a five-year renewable contract with the district, it has long-term sustainability, because the effort can be abandoned only if both the district and the state agree to do so. There's no time frame or performance benchmark for "returning" schools to the district.

The teachers union supported the idea and negotiated a new labor agreement with the zone board, which included longer hours, increased pay, and some compensation based on performance. It also required that each school have a teacher leadership team – four teachers elected by their colleagues and one appointed by the principal – which meets each month to act as the voice of the teachers. In the spring, the leadership team works with the principal to develop a plan for the following year, which is then approved by the SEZP board.<sup>43</sup>

Both principals and teachers agree that the new model creates more buy-in from staff. Principals no longer have to deal with a complicated district bureaucracy, and teachers no longer

have to answer to the district for everything. In exchange for this autonomy, the schools and their leaders also have real accountability. After the first year, the board replaced one school with a charter operator from Boston and brought in veterans from charters to run two others – with the power to hire new staffs and design new programs. (The tenured teachers they dismissed could not be forced on any other school or sent outside the zone; they were guaranteed ongoing pay, and the SEZP worked to find them another spot or help them leave the district for another job. That could become costly for the zone, limiting its ability to restart failing schools.<sup>44</sup>)

**In exchange for this autonomy, the schools and their leaders also have real accountability.**

Other principals cannot dismiss tenured teachers for being a poor fit, and the state procedure for firing a teacher for performance is time-consuming and often contested by the local union. Recognizing these limitations, the zone managers offer principals support in helping underperforming teachers improve or documenting their performance to get rid of them if they don't.<sup>45</sup>

### ***Indianapolis Public Schools***

A third district worthy of study is Indianapolis, which has moved the furthest toward treating in-district autonomous schools like independent charter schools.

Indianapolis has a thriving charter sector, which outperforms the traditional public schools and educates more than a third of public school students within district boundaries. In March of 2015, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools ranked Indiana's charter sector (much of which is in Indianapolis) the nation's second healthiest, behind only Washington, D.C.'s. In that

same year, the state gave nearly 50 percent of Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS) a D or F in its accountability report.<sup>46</sup>

The success of charters put tremendous pressure on IPS to improve. In 2012, education reformers won a majority on the school board, and, in 2014, they strengthened it. They hired a new superintendent, Dr. Lewis Ferebee, who had successfully turned around failing schools in North Carolina by giving them significant autonomy. This experience convinced Ferebee that autonomy was critical. Unlike previous superintendents, who had had a contentious relationship with the charter sector, he quickly forged a relationship with the mayor's charter office. (Indianapolis is the nation's only city where the mayor authorizes charter schools.) Working with the then-deputy mayor for education, he supported state legislation that gave IPS the authority to create innovation network schools.

These schools are exempt from the same laws and regulations charters are exempt from, and they operate outside of IPS's union contracts. The principals and teachers are not IPS employees; they work for the nonprofit corporation that operates the school. Each school's board hires and fires the principal, sets the budget and pay scale, and chooses the school design. All the schools receive IPS buildings, and, for those schools that are not also charters, IPS handles special education.

**These schools are exempt from the same laws and regulations charters are exempt from, and they operate outside of IPS's union contracts.**

The nonprofits have five- to seven-year performance contracts with the district, much like charters. If schools fail to fulfill the terms of

their contracts, the district can refuse to renew them; otherwise, IPS cannot interfere with their autonomy. As noted earlier, The Mind Trust incubates innovation schools (and charters), providing grants and advice to support leaders through a year or two of planning.

By 2017-18, there were 16 innovation network schools in IPS – almost a quarter of the district’s schools. They came in four varieties:

1. New start-ups, some of which were also charter schools.
2. Existing charter schools that chose to become innovation schools and were housed in district buildings.
3. Failing district schools restarted as innovation schools.
4. Existing IPS schools that chose to convert to innovation status.

The new schools tend to build up a grade at a time, while some of the restarts (type 3) take on the entire student body at once. Some are schools of choice; others are neighborhood schools. While Ferebee believes in school choice, he wants all students – even those whose parents don’t take the time to choose – to have access to quality schools. He believes a mix will allow for both high-quality schools of choice and neighborhood schools.

When charter schools become innovation schools, they pay rent to IPS, but at very low rates. Different innovation schools have different agreements with IPS, but most have free or reduced-price bus transportation for students who need it, free utilities, maintenance, special education, and student meals, as well as some additional services. These advantages add up to an average of about \$2,000 per student, which makes becoming an innovation school more attractive than just opening a new charter school.<sup>47</sup> Because of such financial incentives, several successful charter schools decided to replicate as innovation schools.

**Because of such financial incentives, several successful charter schools decided to replicate as innovation schools.**

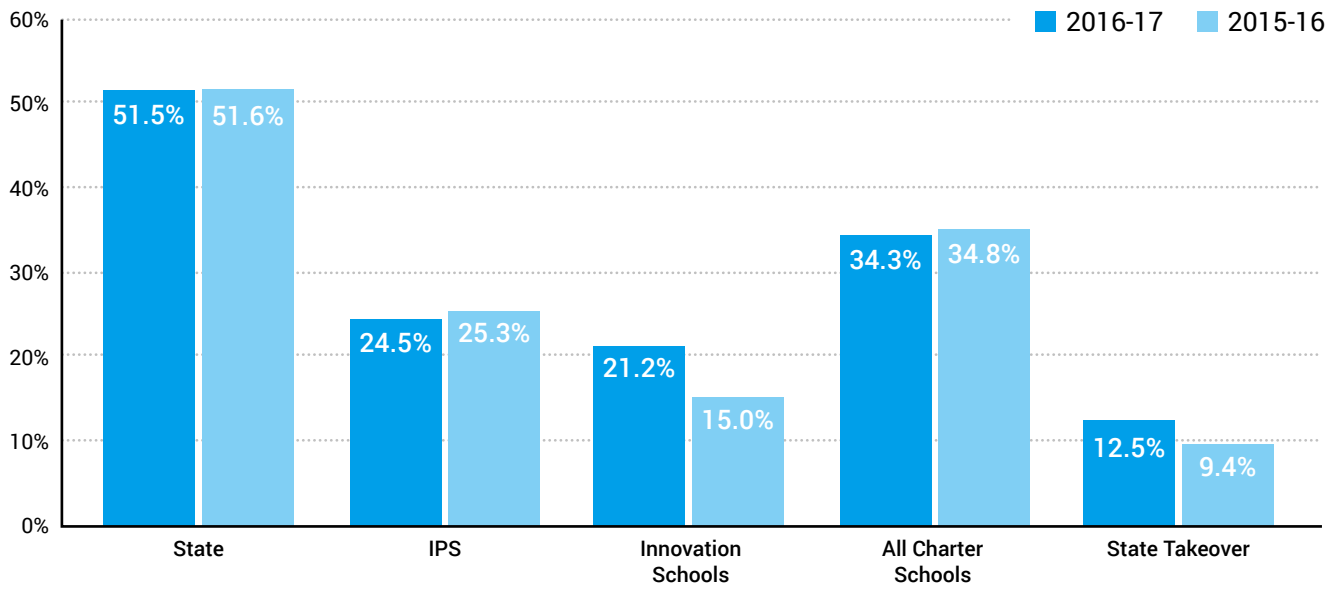
While it’s still early, the results at innovation network schools are promising. They have higher percentages of low-income and minority students than any other type of public schools within IPS boundaries, but, on 2017 state tests, they showed the most rapid improvement in proficiency, as Figure 9 shows. Their academic growth scores were second only to those of charters, as Figure 10 demonstrates.

**FIGURE 9: Student Demographics at Different Types of Indianapolis Schools**

	State	IPS	IPS Innovation Network Schools	All Charter Schools
Free and Reduced Lunch	45.7%	69.3%	76.1%	71.7%
Students of Color	31%	80.3%	93.0%	80.0%

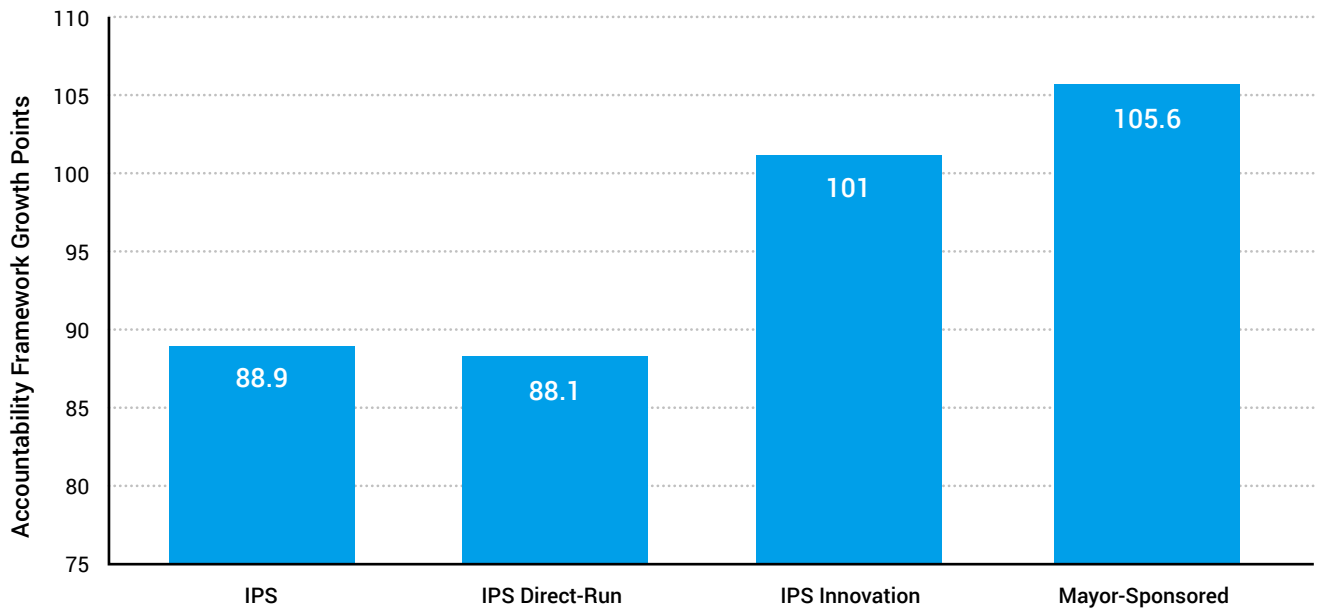
Data Source: Indiana Department of Education

**FIGURE 10: Percent Proficient on Both ELA and Math ISTEP Exams, Spring of 2016 & 2017**



Data Source: Indiana Department of Education

**FIGURE 11: 2016-17 Academic Growth Points in Indiana Accountability Framework**



Data Source: Indiana Department of Education

With a third of IPS students in charters and another 20 percent already in innovation schools, almost half the public school students in Indianapolis attend a school with real autonomy and accountability. Of all the district-run autonomous models around the country, innovation network schools are probably the most promising, because they start with charter-like autonomy rather than with waivers from district rules. If IPS continues to hold them accountable for performance – closing those that fail and replicating those that succeed – they could dramatically change the district’s performance.



## CONCLUSION

On average, in-district autonomous schools have delivered disappointing results. The evidence strongly suggests that cities can create better outcomes by building strong charter sectors. But, in contentious political environments, it is often easier to create in-district autonomous schools than independent charters.

**The evidence strongly suggests that cities can create better outcomes by building strong charter sectors.**

If they can give school leaders true autonomy and hold their schools accountable for results, districts can use in-district autonomous models to produce an increase in student achievement – perhaps approaching that of strong charter sectors. By following the recommendations above, districts can create self-renewing systems of schools in which every school has the incentives and the autonomy to continuously innovate and improve. At the same time, they can offer a variety of school models to families to meet a variety of children’s needs.

Sustainability of in-district autonomy and accountability will always be a question, as we have discussed. But, if done well and sustained, such schools have potential to improve public education in urban America – *if* districts are willing to give them true autonomy and real accountability.

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# Appendix

## BOSTON'S IN-DISTRICT AUTONOMOUS SCHOOLS

### **Horace Mann Charter Schools: High Autonomy**

In 1997, the Massachusetts state legislature created Horace Mann charters as a compromise between district schools and public charter schools. Teachers at these schools remain unionized, but the schools are able to request exemptions from parts of the collective bargaining agreement (CBA) in their charter applications. The school leaders and staff also create a memorandum of understanding (MOU) outlining expectations for teachers beyond the original contract. An independent board of trustees oversees each school, but both the Boston school board (called a “school committee” in Massachusetts) and the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) must approve the charter application. BESE reviews the charters every five years and decides, based on school performance, whether to renew them.

If Horace Mann charters receive approval of their MOU and are granted exemptions from the collective bargaining agreement, the schools can enjoy significant staffing and scheduling autonomy.<sup>48</sup>

Three types of Horace Mann charter schools exist in Massachusetts. All Horace Mann charters in Boston were new startups, although conversions from traditional schools – Type II Horace Mann charter schools – are allowed by law. Two of Boston’s Horace Mann charters are Type I, requiring approval by the local school committee and teachers union before receiving a charter from BESE.<sup>49</sup> Four more are Type III, requiring approval from the school committee but not the union. After receiving their charter from BESE, Type III schools must negotiate with the union for approval of the exemptions laid out in their charter and MOU. If an agreement cannot be reached prior to 30 days before the scheduled opening of a school, the school may operate under the terms of its charter, including all exemptions from the CBA, until an agreement is reached.

**FIGURE 12: The Autonomies of Horace Mann Charter Schools (Contingent upon Approval of Charter and Memorandum of Understanding)**

<p><b>STAFFING</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• With waivers from the CBA, principals can hire teachers regardless of seniority and dismiss teachers, who then return to the district teaching pool</li> <li>• Exemptions from union and district work rules must be outlined in the charter and MOU</li> <li>• Employees remain members of their local union, continue to accrue seniority within that union, and receive the same salary and benefits as other union members, at a minimum</li> </ul>
<p><b>LEARNING MODEL</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School may define a non-standard learning model if outlined in their charter and approved</li> </ul>
<p><b>CURRICULUM</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May choose their own curriculum and materials</li> <li>• May set more rigorous graduation and promotion requirements for students</li> </ul>
<p><b>BUDGETING</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May budget on actual teachers' salaries, as opposed to average teacher salaries of the district (saving money for schools whose teachers have less seniority)</li> <li>• May roll over funds from year to year</li> <li>• May not opt out of district-provided services</li> </ul>
<p><b>SCHEDULE/CALENDAR</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May set the number of school days</li> <li>• May control the bell schedule, including the start and end times of the school day</li> <li>• May extend the school year, with district approval</li> </ul>
<p><b>PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May make decisions about their own professional development, including providers, objectives, and schedule</li> </ul>

**Boston Pilot Schools: High-level Autonomy**

Boston Public Schools created pilot schools in 1995 as a means of fostering innovation in the district and stemming the potential loss of students to charters. BPS has 21 pilot schools

– making it, by far, the district's most common model of semi-autonomous schools. These schools operate under an MOU between the district and the Boston Teachers Union, which outlines their specific autonomies. Additionally,



teachers and staff at pilot schools write and vote on an elect-to-work agreement each year, which lays out the school's expectations for employees beyond what is listed in the union contract. All schools in BPS have mutual consent hiring –

meaning the district cannot force a teacher on a principal – but the elect-to-work agreement gives pilot school principals full discretion over staffing, meaning they can also let teachers go.

**FIGURE 13: The Autonomies of Boston Pilot Schools (Contingent upon the Memorandum of Understanding and Elect-to-work Agreement)**

<p><b>STAFFING</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May hire their own teachers, including those not yet hired by the district</li> <li>• Teachers are union members, but MOU can exempt them from elements of the CBA</li> <li>• May dismiss a teacher to the district pool based on performance</li> <li>• May dismiss a teacher if s/he is not committed to the vision of the school or has not met the added expectations of the elect-to-work agreement</li> </ul>
<p><b>LEARNING MODEL</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May control their learning model if approved in their pilot school plan and by their governing board</li> </ul>
<p><b>CURRICULUM</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May choose their own curriculum and materials</li> <li>• May set more rigorous graduation and promotion requirements</li> </ul>
<p><b>BUDGETING</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May budget on actual teacher salaries</li> <li>• May not opt out of district-provided services</li> <li>• May not roll over leftover funds from one school year to the next</li> </ul>
<p><b>SCHEDULE/CALENDAR</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May set the number of school days</li> <li>• May control the bell schedule, including the start and end times of the school day</li> <li>• May extend the school day with district approval</li> </ul>
<p><b>PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May make decisions about their own professional development, including providers, objectives, and schedule</li> </ul>

**Innovation Schools: High-level Autonomy**

In January 2010, in an effort to secure \$250 million in federal Race to the Top money, the Massachusetts legislature passed *An Act Relative to the Achievement Gap*. It allowed districts to create innovation schools, with the hope that increased autonomy would lead to improved teaching and learning. The first innovation school in Boston opened in 2011, and six are in operation today. Applicants design an innovation plan – either to create a new school or convert an existing school – outlining the specific autonomies for the school and measurable annual goals. The Boston School Committee (appointed by the mayor) approves,

amends, or rejects the plan. Every five years, the Committee either renews or revokes the plan based on the school’s annual performance reviews.

In the innovation plan, a new school can request waivers to the collective bargaining agreement. A conversion school can request the same waivers as long as two-thirds of the school’s teachers approve. Innovation schools are eligible for many autonomies; however, the number they receive depends on whether the School Committee approves the innovation plan in its entirety or suggests changes.<sup>50</sup>

**FIGURE 14: The Autonomies of Boston Innovation Schools (Contingent upon Approval of Innovation Plan)**

<b>STAFFING</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Waivers to the CBA allow principals to hire teachers regardless of seniority or current employment by the district, dismiss teachers based on performance to the district pool, and opt out of union seniority requirements during layoffs</li> </ul>
<b>LEARNING MODEL</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May establish non-standard learning models if approved as part of their innovation plan</li> </ul>
<b>CURRICULUM</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May choose their own curriculum and materials</li> </ul>
<b>BUDGETING</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May budget on actual teachers’ salaries</li> <li>• May roll over funds from year to year</li> <li>• May not opt out of district-provided services</li> </ul>
<b>SCHEDULE/CALENDAR</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May set the number of school days</li> <li>• May control the bell schedule, including the start and end times of the school day</li> <li>• May extend the school day with district approval</li> </ul>
<b>PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May make decisions about their own professional development, including providers, objectives, and schedule</li> </ul>

**Turnaround Schools: Mid-level Autonomy**

Turnaround Schools were also created as a part of the 2010 legislation. They are similar to innovation schools, except they have been previously classified by the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education as “at risk” schools. The department ranks schools on a scale of 1 to 5. Level 5 schools are considered failing and are subject to closure. Level 4 schools, which are “at risk,” become turnaround schools. If a principal has been at a school for more than three years when it enters

turnaround status, he or she is replaced. All teachers must reapply for their jobs.

Principals must develop plans that outline how they will use their autonomy to exit Level 4 status within three years. In Boston, the district works closely with the principal in writing the plan and ultimately decides on the school’s learning model. The commissioner of education evaluates their progress at the three-year mark.

Boston currently has 12 turnaround schools.

**FIGURE 15: The Autonomies of Boston Turnaround Schools (Contingent upon Approval of Turnaround Plan)**

<b>STAFFING</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If in turnaround plan, may hire teachers regardless of seniority, dismiss teachers back to the district pool, opt out of union seniority requirements during layoffs, and dismiss non-instructional staff</li> </ul>
<b>LEARNING MODEL</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Principal has input with the district in determining the school’s learning model</li> </ul>
<b>CURRICULUM</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Must use district curriculum</li> <li>• May choose own materials</li> </ul>
<b>BUDGETING</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Must budget on average district teacher’s salary</li> <li>• May not opt out of district service providers</li> <li>• May not roll over leftover funds from one school year to the next</li> </ul>
<b>SCHEDULE/CALENDAR</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May set the number of school days</li> <li>• May control the bell schedule, but cannot set start and end times of the school day</li> <li>• May extend the school day with district approval</li> </ul>
<b>PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May make their own decisions about professional development, including providers, objectives, and schedule</li> </ul>

## LOS ANGELES'S IN-DISTRICT AUTONOMOUS SCHOOLS

### **Pilot Schools: Mid-level Autonomy**

There are currently 51 pilot schools in LAUSD. A Governing School Council (GSC) – composed of the principal, teachers, other school personnel, parents, community members, representatives from community-based organizations or universities, and students (for middle and high schools) – is charged with overseeing each pilot school.<sup>51</sup> A union representative is not automatically entitled to membership on the GCS.

The GCS sets the school's mission and goals, approves the annual budget, recommends the selection of the principal, oversees principal evaluations, communicates regularly with the local district superintendent (who makes hiring and firing decisions about principals), annually reviews progress on indicators of student achievement, and puts a plan in place to address any achievement issues.<sup>52</sup>

At pilot schools, teachers remain unionized; however, the teachers are asked to sign an elect-to-work agreement, which contains responsibilities beyond the union contract. If approved by the GCS and at least two-thirds of the school's certified staff, it goes into effect. If more than a third of the staff reject it, it goes back to the GCS for rewriting.

Pilot schools operate under a memorandum of understanding between the LAUSD and the UTLA. This document lists 10 articles of the

collective bargaining agreement with which pilot schools must comply; they can request waivers to all other parts of the CBA. Pilot school principals may dismiss teachers, who are then guaranteed the right to transfer to a school in the same geographic area. If no vacancy is available within a reasonable distance, an LAUSD human resources officer and a UTLA representative meet to discuss options.

Pilot schools are monitored by the Pilot School Steering Committee (PSSC), which is made up of representatives from the district, the teachers union, the Associated Administrators of Los Angeles, and community organizations. The PSSC manages the application and oversight process. When a traditional public school applies to convert to a pilot school, 67 percent of UTLA members must vote in favor of the conversion. Application for all new schools in the LAUSD, regardless of school type, must be approved by the Board of Education.

The PSSC vets all pilot school plans, makes recommendations to the Board of Education for approvals, and monitors the performance of schools, making sure they meet yearly benchmarks for student performance. At a school's third year – and every five years thereafter – the PSSC conducts a quality review, which requires a school visit and a thorough analysis of performance. Based on the review, the PSSC recommends the school for renewal, intervention, or closure, and the regional district superintendent makes the final decision.

**FIGURE 16: The Autonomies of Los Angeles’s Pilot Schools (Contingent upon the Elect-to-work Agreement)**

<p><b>STAFFING</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• GSC develops a process for recruitment of staff, creation of selection committee, screening and interviewing of candidates, and selection of finalist candidate</li> <li>• Selection committees and process vary; final selection decision may rest with principal or the committee, by consensus</li> <li>• Principal may dismiss personnel if they fail to meet expectations of elect-to-work agreement or are not committed to school's vision</li> </ul>
<p><b>LEARNING MODEL</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May control learning model if outlined in school plan and approved, with two exceptions:</li> <li>• Learning models that include specialized LAUSD certifications, such as project-based and dual-language, must comply with LAUSD regulations and receive approval from specific departments in addition to school board</li> </ul>
<p><b>CURRICULUM</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maximum flexibility over curriculum design and development</li> </ul>
<p><b>BUDGETING</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• GSC determines resource allocation</li> </ul>
<p><b>SCHEDULE/CALENDAR</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can extend number of school days if in elect-to-work agreement</li> </ul>
<p><b>PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can design and implement at school level</li> </ul>

**Local Initiative Schools: Low-level Autonomy**

Local Initiative Schools began in 2011, as part of John Deasy’s Local School Stabilization and Empowerment Initiative. There are currently 17 LIS schools in operation, which can exercise autonomies from a list of 15 options. Any policy change beyond this list requires the school to request a waiver from the union contract, which both the UTLA and the LAUSD must approve. Converting to LIS status requires 60 percent of

the UTLA-represented staff to vote in favor of the change.

One of the 15 autonomies covers the staff selection process. If an LIS school applies for this autonomy, it can select staff as a pilot school does. An MOU between LIS schools, LAUSD, and the UTLA permits the schools to use mutual consent hiring – meaning both the school and teacher must agree to a placement.

However, LIS schools must still comply with “return rights,” which outline conditions in which displaced teachers can return to former placements based on seniority and other factors. While the teachers sign a “commitment to implement the school plan,” which is similar to the elect-to-work agreement, it does not empower the principal to remove a teacher.<sup>53</sup>

LIS schools must have their plans approved by their local leadership council, which also

governs employee training, student schedules, and designated budgetary matters. All LAUSD schools have such councils, which are composed of the principal, teachers, administrators, parents, students (for secondary schools), and members of the community. The principal and UTLA chair at the school are automatic members, while the others are elected by their respective groups.

**FIGURE 17: The Autonomies of Los Angeles’s Local Initiative Schools (LIS) (Contingent upon Approval of the School Plan by the Local Leadership Council)**

<p><b>STAFFING</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mutual consent hiring in accordance with LAUSD policy and CBA</li> <li>• Exempt from district-mandated priority placements, but not from “return rights”</li> <li>• If granted staff selection autonomy, can design selection committee and process like a pilot school</li> <li>• No extra authority to dismiss teachers</li> </ul>
<p><b>LEARNING MODEL</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May control learning model if outlined in school plan and approved, with two exceptions:</li> <li>• Learning models that include specialized LAUSD certifications, like project-based and dual-language, must comply with LAUSD regulations and receive approval from specific departments in addition to school board</li> </ul>
<p><b>CURRICULUM</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May choose their own curriculum</li> </ul>
<p><b>BUDGETING</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some local discretion over resource allocation</li> </ul>
<p><b>SCHEDULE/CALENDAR</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do not control</li> </ul>
<p><b>PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May design and implement at school level</li> </ul>

**Expanded School-based Management Model (ESBMM): Low-level Autonomy**

Also created under the Local School Stabilization and Empowerment Initiative of 2011, ESBMM schools are preferred by the teachers union over pilot and LIS schools. They may exercise autonomies from a list of only six options. The school leadership council makes key decisions and approves the annual budget, recommends the principal, annually reviews student progress, and puts a plan in place to address achievement gaps.<sup>55</sup> There are currently 25 ESBMM schools.<sup>56</sup>

If a school wants to become one, it submits a school plan to the Office of School Design Options. Unlike the application for a new school, a conversion school’s plan needs the approval of only the superintendent, not the LAUSD education board. As with pilots and LIS schools, ESBMM schools could include a specific learning model in their plans – but, so far, that has not happened.

**FIGURE 18: The Autonomies of Los Angeles’s Expanded School-based Management Model (ESBMM)**

<p><b>STAFFING</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School leadership council establishes a selection committee comprising school principal, teachers union chapter chair, teachers, parents, students (at the secondary level), and classified staff to select personnel by consensus, in accordance with LAUSD staffing policies and procedures</li> <li>• No extra authority to dismiss teachers</li> </ul>
<p><b>LEARNING MODEL</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May control learning model if outlined in school plan and approved, with two exceptions:</li> <li>• Learning models that include specialized LAUSD certifications, like project-based and dual-language, must comply with LAUSD regulations and receive approval from specific departments in addition to school board</li> </ul>
<p><b>CURRICULUM</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May opt out of district curriculum</li> </ul>
<p><b>BUDGETING</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School leadership council determines resource allocation</li> </ul>
<p><b>SCHEDULE/CALENDAR</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May change bell schedule</li> </ul>
<p><b>PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May design and implement at school level</li> </ul>

**Network Partner Schools: Low-level Autonomy**

After Mayor Villaraigosa convinced the school board to contract with his Partnership for LA Schools, the district later partnered with other networks. Designed to improve the performance of the district’s highest needs schools, network partners (now called “lead partners”) oversee school operations and facilitate improvement – just as a charter management organization would with its schools.<sup>57</sup> But the employees remain district employees, covered by the district’s collective bargaining agreements.

There are more than 20 network partner schools in the LAUSD, and the district currently has partnership agreements with three organizations: Partnership for LA Schools, LA Promise Fund, and the Youth Policy Institute. Each partner negotiates a five-year memorandum of understanding with the district, which reviews its performance every five years

and decides whether to renew. In addition, the district keeps watch on the performance of individual partner schools, and it can intervene at any time – even taking a school back from the partner’s control. In addition, the district does a more thorough review of each school at least every five years to make sure it is meeting performance targets. In the decade or more since the first partnership was set up, however, LAUSD has not closed a partnership school for performance.

Schools keep their district enrollment boundaries, calendars, and schedules. In concert with their lead partner, they can develop their own curricula, learning models, budgets, staff selection processes, and professional development. But they have limited staffing autonomy and are sometimes forced by the district to take teachers they do not want.

**FIGURE 19: The Autonomies of Los Angeles’s Network Partner Schools**

<b>STAFFING</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers go through district hiring process</li> <li>• Partners attempt to recruit talent and may develop their own selection committees, but schools must follow LAUSD and CBA hiring policies, which sometimes means taking a forced placement</li> <li>• No extra authority to dismiss teachers</li> </ul>
<b>LEARNING MODEL</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May develop their own learning model</li> </ul>
<b>CURRICULUM</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May opt out of district curriculum</li> </ul>
<b>BUDGETING</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School site council and school leadership determine resource allocation, with some input from network partner</li> </ul>
<b>SCHEDULE/CALENDAR</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do not control</li> </ul>
<b>PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May design and implement at school level</li> </ul>



**Affiliated Charters: Low-level Autonomy**

The California Charter School Act of 1992 allowed creation of both independent and district-affiliated charters. There are currently 53 affiliated charter schools in the LAUSD. California’s charter law does not specify differences between types of charters, nor does it outline the relationship between a district and an affiliated charter, which means such charters look very different in both design and demographics from one district to another.<sup>58</sup> In the LAUSD, affiliated charters are primarily in more affluent neighborhoods, where they have been used to empower teachers to go beyond district mandates. While 83 percent of students

in independent charters are from low-income families, the percentage in affiliated charters is only 44.<sup>59</sup>

To convert a traditional public school to an affiliated charter, the principal must initiate the application, and the majority of full-time teaching staff must support the conversion. However, the teaching staff remain district employees, subject to the collective bargaining agreement unless otherwise outlined in the approved charter. Charters must be approved by the Board of Education, and they are renewed every five years. Each school has a governance council, made up of teachers and parents, which advises the school leader.<sup>60</sup>

**FIGURE 20: The Autonomies of Los Angeles’s Affiliated Charter Schools**

<b>STAFFING</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personnel assigned according to LAUSD policy and CBA unless selection process laid out in charter and approved by the Board of Education</li> <li>• If selection process is laid out and approved, principal can select staff that fits mission</li> <li>• No extra authority to dismiss teachers</li> </ul>
<b>LEARNING MODEL</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Schools may implement specialized pedagogies if approved by the district</li> </ul>
<b>CURRICULUM</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May choose texts and curriculum, but can use state funds only on state-approved materials</li> </ul>
<b>BUDGETING</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discretion over minor amounts of funding</li> <li>• May not opt out of district services</li> </ul>
<b>SCHEDULE/CALENDAR</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do not control</li> </ul>
<b>PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May design and implement at school level</li> </ul>

**MEMPHIS'S IN-DISTRICT  
AUTONOMOUS SCHOOLS**

**Innovation Zone Schools: Mid-level Autonomy**

These schools have autonomy over curriculum and staffing but not over budgeting or teacher compensation, though teachers can receive performance bonuses. Teachers must reapply for their positions when a school is taken over by the iZone, and the new principal has full

discretion over hiring. While these schools cannot control their schedule or calendar, each school day is extended by one hour, and schools can individually decide what to do with that time. Some schools offer remediation periods, while others offer chess lessons.<sup>61</sup>

**FIGURE 21: The Autonomies of Memphis's iZone Schools**

<b>STAFFING</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May hire teachers at school level</li> <li>• May dismiss "bad fit" teachers back to district pool</li> </ul>
<b>LEARNING MODEL</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May implement new learning model if outlined in school plan and approved by district</li> </ul>
<b>CURRICULUM</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May choose their own curriculum</li> <li>• Materials must be approved by district</li> </ul>
<b>BUDGETING</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Only controlled federal School Improvement Grant funding left over after compensating teachers for extended day, but that funding no longer exists</li> </ul>
<b>SCHEDULE/CALENDAR</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May control bell schedule</li> <li>• Mandatory extended school day by one hour</li> </ul>
<b>PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Schools receive intensive coaching and support from iZone leadership (district)</li> <li>• Other PD left to principal's discretion</li> </ul>

## DENVER'S IN-DISTRICT AUTONOMOUS SCHOOLS

### Innovation Schools: High-level Autonomy

Of the district's more than 200 schools, 49 or 58 were innovation schools in 2017-18, depending upon whether the combined middle and high schools are counted as one or two schools.<sup>62</sup> After a rough start, they are now authorized much like charter schools, with a year to plan, and the most successful are allowed to replicate. But they don't face the same consequences as charters: If they fail to meet enrollment targets, the district often fills them anyway; and none have yet been closed for low performance, though a few have landed in DPS's lowest performance category.

While they can get waivers to some rules, they have less autonomy than charter schools. Some

principals we interviewed were happy with their autonomy, while others were frustrated. In part that depended upon their instructional superintendent, budget partner, and HR partner, because these central office staff members' views about autonomy varied.

In 2015, 17 innovation school leaders expressed their frustration in a letter to (and meeting with) Superintendent Tom Boasberg. They won some concessions, but, by the next fall, a handful of them were still frustrated, so they proposed an innovation zone, with its own nonprofit board, which would negotiate additional flexibilities and performance goals with the district. Despite resistance from some central office staff, the school board pushed it through, and today the Luminary Learning Network has four schools, with some additional autonomies.

**FIGURE 22: The Autonomies of Denver's Innovation Schools**

<b>STAFFING</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May hire teachers at school level</li> <li>• Innovation plan can waive CBA, if 60 percent of teachers vote for it</li> <li>• Innovation plan may waive tenure for new teachers only</li> </ul>
<b>LEARNING MODEL</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May control learning model if in innovation plan and approved</li> </ul>
<b>CURRICULUM</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May set curriculum</li> <li>• May choose materials</li> </ul>
<b>BUDGETING</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May budget on actual teacher salaries</li> <li>• May opt out of some district services</li> </ul>
<b>SCHEDULE/CALENDAR</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May control bell schedule</li> <li>• May control calendar and length of school day</li> </ul>
<b>PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited autonomy over professional development (changed in 2016; they may now opt out of district PD and receive per-student dollar amount for PD they control)</li> </ul>

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# Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the Walton Family Foundation and the Laura and John Arnold Foundation for their support of this work. In addition, they would like to thank Molly Osborne and Jake Taylor, who did many of the interviews and collected the data and performed the regression analysis on test score data in the four cities, as part of their research for a master's thesis at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. We would also like to thank those in the Los Angeles Unified School District, Shelby County Schools, Denver Public Schools, and Boston Public Schools who took the time to help us understand the complexities of various forms of autonomous district schools, as well as The Mind Trust in Indianapolis for providing data on test scores there. Finally, we are grateful to those at the Progressive Policy Institute who contributed to this report, including President Will Marshall, who provided editorial guidance, and Jana Plat, who shepherded the manuscript through to publication.

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Founded in 1989, PPI started as the intellectual home of the New Democrats and earned a reputation as President Bill Clinton’s “idea mill.” Many of its mold-breaking ideas have been translated into public policy and law and have influenced international efforts to modernize progressive politics.

Today, PPI is developing fresh proposals for stimulating U.S. economic innovation and growth; equipping all Americans with the skills and assets that social mobility in the knowledge economy requires; modernizing an overly bureaucratic and centralized public sector; and defending liberal democracy in a dangerous world.

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